

The background of the cover is a dynamic space battle scene. Several large, dark, angular starships are visible. Two prominent green laser beams cut across the upper half of the image. In the lower center, a ship is shown in a state of intense destruction, with bright orange and yellow fire and energy bursts emanating from its core. The overall color palette is dominated by teal, green, and dark blue, with high-contrast highlights from the ship lights and explosions.

**DAVID VANDYKE
B.V. LARSON**

GALACTIC LIBERATION BOOK 4

HIVE WAR

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HIVE WAR

(Galactic Liberation Series #4)

by

David VanDyke

and

B. V. Larson

Galactic Liberation Series:

Starship Liberator

Battleship Indomitable

Flagship Victory

Hive War

Straker's Breakers

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Part I: Warlord

For the space of eleven months after the reunification of humanity's two empires into the Earthan Republic, we had peace. I don't know exactly why the Opters gave us this breathing room. I wouldn't have in their place.

But alien minds are alien. Despite all effort the humanopt agent Myrmidon put into explaining the Opter viewpoint, he couldn't entirely predict what they'd do, why—or when.

Yet everyone knew the Opters were coming. The threat unified a thousand systems, and it kept the Republic from falling apart. I never thought I'd be happy about an impending invasion, but in this case, I was.

Better that millions perish resisting alien invasion than billions die in a new civil war.

I didn't waste the gift of time. My order for an Opter-beating ship yielded a new class: the cutter. These cutters were not large—bigger than one-man attack ships, smaller than corvettes. They had a crew of four and the best SAI we could design. They mounted only beam weapons for simplicity and maximum anti-drone work. They were fast, maneuverable, cheap—and simple to make, so simple that even the smallest civilian shipyard could take the standardized plans and build them. This upped our production rate by a factor of a hundred. We built thousands of cutters, fast.

But they were tin cans, miserable deathtraps, and stripped to the bone. No survival pods, no showers, no galleys, no creature comforts. Unlike conventional warships, they had no redundancy. If something failed in the midst of battle, the crew was out of luck until they could get help from a real ship.

In my book, that made every spacer on them a hero.

The Ruxins took a different approach to an Opter-killer. With characteristic energy—and, I suspect, a little alien tech from their vault—they commissioned a new class of ships they called skimmers. Though not capital ships, they were larger than Archers, almost the size of a frigate, but with a very different design.

- A History of Galactic Liberation, by Derek Barnes Straker, 2860 A.D.

Chapter 1

Council Chamber, Planet Home, Hive System, Empire of the Species
(Opters)

The Sarmok Queen called Siskir, First-Born of the Species and second only to the Empress Herself, observed the multiple holo-displays with her many-faceted eyes. Scent-sensing antennae absorbed aromatic supplemental information much like a human would read text.

Her senses revealed a vast assemblage of military power ready to launch from thirty-six separate star systems. The fleets would incorporate an equal number of human—or human-allied—systems into The Species before launching again in another cycle of conquest.

Finally, The Species would seize its long-awaited destiny. Too long had the cautious, equivocal Miskor held The Species back. Too long had confrontation with weaker, less fit creatures been delayed by policies of subversion.

Too long had the natural order of things been denied.

“This initiation of wholesale hostilities remains an error,” said Queen Mutrek of the Miskor, Second-Born, from across the Council Chamber. She rested in her divan at the head of the lesser delegation, left of the Empress, as Siskir rested to Her right, at the head of the greater delegation.

“Your dissenting opinion is well known and has been overruled,” replied Siskir.

“I emphasize for the record. When this adventure comes to its inevitable disastrous fruition, the Miskor will share no blame.”

“And therefore no reward. Room to expand, room to live.”

“If you Sarmok restricted your breeding properly and hewed closely to the Edicts, you would have no need of expansion. The Edicts tell us how to live in harmony by balancing all things—attack and defense, life and death, give and take.”

Siskir raised her scent-voice. “From your own glands is the truth revealed. As the Edicts require, there is a time and a purpose for every action. The time to take is now, and the purpose is the glory and benefit of The Species. The cowardly, backward-looking Miskor will be left behind in the march of progress.”

“I protest this ignoble Sarmok slander.”

“You—”

The scent-voice of the Empress cut across the debate. “The First-Born shall apologize to the Second-Born for her unseemly characterization of the noble Miskor.”

Siskir immediately bowed. “I apologize for my characterization of the noble Miskor.” She raised her head. “Yet the underlying facts are undeniable. For those, no apology is required.”

Mutrek replied, “The Sarmok may soon have further cause to give apology to those they affront.”

Siskir reared in dramatic and insincere amazement. “You take the humans’ part? You claim, as we have heard, that their race is the equal of The Species?”

“Do not put words on my glands. The Species is the superior. However, inferiority does not equate to worthlessness—or to the inability to inflict defeat. Galactic history is replete with examples of sophisticated, erudite races brought low by barbarians. Superiority of intellect, culture and morality is no guarantee of battlefield victory.”

“We have barbarians of our own,” said Siskir. “They will assist us, a lesser race used against another lesser race. This is also balance.”

“So you admit you need assistance?”

“I admit nothing. It is efficient to let others work on our behalf.”

“To do your dirty work, you mean.”

“See how she views the noble Sarmok? As someone to do Miskor dirty work.” Siskir was pleased with her own clever rhetoric. “We are well aware the Miskor are effete snobs, profiting from the efforts of us more workaday Sarmok. Miskor are unwilling to sully their mandibles with honest labor while they hide behind Sarmok courage.”

Mutrek twitched in irritation. “No person here believes your posturing, Siskir. No one even believes *you* believe it. Your words are dragonfly wings, dazzling but without substance. What matters is, for the first time in a thousand years, The Species is conducting an offensive war. To promote victory, we have invited aliens into our midst, aliens with technology we ourselves have not mastered. This is madness.”

“It is the madness of the bait-spider, which uses one beetle to kill another. Only by involving the Azoics in battle can we discern their secrets and acquire them for ourselves.”

“Always you wish to take from others.” Mutrek turned to the Empress. “Mother of Us All, I implore you once more to overrule the will of the Sarmok and return to the Paths of the Edicts—and of wisdom.”

As usual, the Empress chose her words carefully. “Did I so, I would be overruling the will of not only the Sarmok, but of the Miskor and the Minor Factions as well, for the Edicts you cite demand that once the Council has decided, the will of the Council becomes the will of all—including the Miskor. This principle ensures unity of The Species. I bow to the will of the Council.”

“As the Edicts require,” declared Siskir triumphantly, pounding the stinger in. The Empress’s own words confirmed Her weakness and unfitness to rule.

Perhaps her mistakes would soon cause change.

The Empress raised her voice to continue, fixing her gaze on the Sarmok side of the Chamber. “As long as new conditions do not arise, that is—and I am the judge of conditions. If the Will of the Species is thwarted, if our attempts to bring our inferiors under our benevolent sway proves too costly—in fact, if this Sarmok-led adventure goes awry—I will call another Convention of the Council of Queens.”

“As the Edicts require,” Siskir said without emotion.

The Empress turned toward the Miskor and spoke firmly. “Until such time as a new Convention is called, the Miskor will act properly and support the Will of The Species in all things.”

“As the Edicts require,” said Mutrek, bowing her head.

“As the Edicts require,” the entire Council intoned.

“This Convention is adjourned.” With the Empress’s final words, the Council dissolved.

Siskir allowed herself to be amused at the pontificating and the insincere citation of the Edicts of Molokor, the ultimate scripture of The Species. Few actually followed the letter, much less the spirit, of that outmoded tome of so-called wisdom—not the glorious and powerful Sarmok, not the self-righteous, human-loving, devious and unscrupulous Miskor, and certainly not the weak-minded Minor Factions.

Perhaps, when this was all over, and only the Sarmok remained, even the Edicts themselves could be consigned to the ash heap of history.

Along with the current Empress.

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Chapter 2

Earthan Republic regional military command center, Atlantis system

“It’s been eleven months since we united humanity under the banner of the Earthan Republic,” said the Liberator, Derek Straker, as he gazed calmly at the huge displays. “We’ve always expected the Opters to attack since then. Frankly, I’m surprised they’ve waited this long.”

Straker stood in Fleet’s regional command center, buried deep within an asteroid fortress orbiting above the old Hundred Worlds capital of Atlantis. He and his wife, Admiral Carla Engels—and their new baby daughter Katrine—made their home on the fortress since the capitulation. In that time, both of them had worked overtime to prepare for the Opter invasion.

Now, it was finally coming.

Engels pursed her lips and shifted in her command chair. “Recon reports show thirty-six distinct fleets assembling in thirty-six separate Sarmok systems. We can guess at where they’ll strike, and when, but we can’t be certain.”

“Best assessment, then.”

Engels signaled the intel tech running the holos. They changed to show a swath of systems on the Opter border, marked in red and yellow. “The red are high-probability targets. The yellow are possibles.”

Straker turned to face Engels. “We need to ambush them with the new cutters.” He was referring to the new, cheap anti-Opter ships built by the thousands all across the Republic.

“We can’t win every battle, even if we guess perfectly. We shouldn’t even try.”

“He who defends everywhere, defends nowhere,” Straker agreed. “As Sun Tzu said.”

Engels nodded. “We can save some star systems, but not all. The Opters outnumber us at least two to one in combat power. The more we concentrate, the more sure we are of winning—but we have to let some systems fall. Temporarily.”

Straker smiled without humor. “Ruthless. The politicians will hate it. Civilians will suffer.”

“That’s how to win when you don’t have the luxury of superior combat power.”

“I know. So... where?”

Engels gestured again and seven systems brightened. “These.”

“Why?”

“A synthesis of reasons. They’re the most defensible, the most important, the best positioned, the most likely to hold out once the mobile forces leave. I can send you the analysis.”

Straker held up a hand. “No need. Which one is the single most important system? The one we absolutely must hold?”

Engels pointed. “Celadon. It’s the regional economic center, with good defenses. It’s a former Mutuality planet, but being near the border, it had more autonomy than usual. As a result, its economy prospered. They even had commerce going with the Opters, indirectly, through Thorian traders.”

“Hope they found most of the humanopt agents, then.”

“Benota tells me they’ve identified many of them with the new tests.”

Straker shook his head. “How do we really know?”

He stared at the star system projection, thinking hard.

“Can’t do anything about infiltration now,” Engels said. “So... What are our plans for Celadon?”

“I’m going there. I want to see the new ships fight. I’ll inspire the troops and personally observe the enemy in battle.”

Engels straightened. “You mean *we’re* going there.”

Straker moved closer and lowered his voice. “You have Katrine to take care of. Besides, risking both of us in the same battle is foolish.”

“Katrine will be fine with the nanny—and I’m your chief tactician. If anyone should go, I should. You can stay behind and direct grand strategy.”

“I know you’re eager to get into battle—”

“—like you are—”

“—granted, but physically you’re not operating at one hundred percent. Further, you’re better with all the admin of rebuilding the Fleet. You’ve done wonders in the last year.”

Engels snorted. She clearly wasn’t mollified. “It wasn’t just me. Vic and Trinity, Benota and DeChang and a lot of other people across a thousand worlds helped a great deal. Admiral Niedern has even gotten on board.”

“That’s another reason you need to stay—to keep an eye on him. I don’t trust that guy. He wants your job.”

Engels’ lips curled. “That reminds me. I’ll shift some of my duties onto him, to keep him busy.”

“Smart girl. When will the first Opter fleets hit us?”

“Best guess again? Five to nine days.”

Straker pecked her lips. “Now that our roles are settled, assemble me a fleet that will get to Celadon in five days and win. I want Admiral Hoyt as operational commander, and I’ll take Trinity as my personal yacht and intelligence chief if I can. Beyond that, you choose. I’m leaving in twelve hours.”

He could feel Carla’s eyes burning holes in his back as he left, but put her feelings out of his mind. This was military, not personal, and she was a professional. She’d get over her momentary annoyance.

Straker stopped by the fortress’s nearby comms center, which handled the voluminous traffic among ships, task forces and fleets. Message drones were constantly coming and going from the edge of flatspace, tiny robot ships whose sole function was to carry all the information of government and the military from star to star through sidespace. Until the new FTL communications could be extended to stellar ranges—a tall order, at least years away—this was how business got done.

“Message to Trinity, flash priority,” he said to the senior tech.

“Rendezvous with Straker and fleet at Celadon not later than 110 hours from now. Expect Opter attack. Timestamp and send.”

“Got it, sir.”

Flash priority would put the same message on all drones, couriers and ships, ensuring the highest chance of the word getting through. It reminded Straker of the old seafaring days before radio, where packet ships of the British Empire would carry orders and reports all over Old Earth in a vast sail-powered network.

“Local message now,” Straker continued.

“Ready, sir.”

“The following personnel report to my office ASAP: Zaxby, Paloco, Heiser, Redwolf. Confirm receipt on those. Next, the following to comlink me if they’re in-system. If not, disregard: Admiral Hoyt, Commodore Zholin, Commodore Dexon. Separate general order: all Breakers in-system to contact their chain of command and assemble aboard this fortress. Report results. I’ll be on comlink.”

The tech furiously took notes. “Aye aye, sir.”

By the time Straker reached his flag office, Master Sergeant Redwolf was waiting for him. Though he’d taken brainchips and had completed

mechsuirer training, he still insisted on acting as Straker's combination valet, bodyguard and head of personal security. Straker didn't see any point in dissuading him.

Heiser and Loco showed up right behind Redwolf. Straker briefed them on what he knew. "We leave in eleven hours for Celadon."

"Why?" asked Loco.

Straker stopped short. "Why what?"

"Why take the Breakers at all? This will be a space battle. We already have a captured Queen, and the brainiacs have examined the Nest Ship and all the Opter tech aboard, so there's no need to capture another one. Celadon system has over a billion inhabitants. A few hundred elite ground troops won't matter to the defense."

"I was intending to take the *Richthofen* and the First Mechsuit Regiment too."

Loco rolled his eyes. "The *only* mechsuit regiment, you mean, until Second Regiment is operational. I'm still asking why."

"Because they're not garrison troops. They're shock troops. They haven't been in battle since the unification. They have the new Jackhammers and the factory-built Sledgehammers. They need to fight with them for real, outside of VR."

"You could've had them fight at Wittmire-4."

Straker frowned. "We already discussed that. That was an uprising by a local strongman. I didn't want mechsuirers suppressing an insurgency or killing humans. Now, though, the Sarmok are attacking. We can't assume they won't spring something new on us, and this is a battle we have to win. No, we have to dominate the Opters, crush them. I allowed one Queen to surrender because we needed every edge at the Battle of Atlantis, plus the intel from her interrogation—but I'm in the mood to hand these motherfuckers their heads this time for what they did to the crew of *Indomitable*. You remember that?"

Loco sighed. "Yeah, Derek, I remember. I was there."

"And the Breakers deserve to be there, to take some heads back for those we lost."

Loco exchanged glances with Redwolf and Heiser. "I'm cool with that, boss. I just don't want you manufacturing a battle for the poor bloody infantry when the Fleet can do the job."

“I think I liked you better when you just went along with everything I said.”

Loco grimaced. “I’m still going along, but these are my troops too. You always told me to grow up. This is me growing up. That means you get pushback when I don’t agree with something. Be careful what you wish for. You might get it.”

Straker slapped Loco on the shoulder. “Fair enough. I promise not to get anyone killed for no reason.”

“I prefer we not get killed at all.”

“No guarantees.”

Loco sat back, putting his feet on Straker’s desk, just as Zaxby entered without knocking and announced, “I have arrived, as ordered.”

“Great.” Straker quickly summarized the situation for Zaxby. “I’ve sent a flash message for Trinity to meet us there. You want to come along and rejoin your collective?”

“Despite your sarcasm,” Zaxby replied, “I am not subsumed in the group mind. I do feel its absence, but I am still my usual hyper-competent self. In fact, I’ve been quite busy lately with several projects—”

“Save it. We’ll have plenty of time to catch up in sidespace.”

“Oh, you’re joining me aboard the *Darter*?” The *Darter* was Zaxby’s new Ruxin-built skimmer ship.

“Hell, no, I’m not traveling on your soggy tin can. It’s small enough to dock with the *Richthofen* and transit together, right?”

“It is, though size isn’t everything.”

Loco smirked. “That’s what *she* said.”

“To what ‘she’ do you refer?”

“Your mama.”

Straker raised his voice. “Shut up, both of you, and get moving. Dismissed.”

* * *

Hours later, when he could take a break from preparing the task force, Straker met Carla in their shared quarters.

When he tried to take her in his arms, she put a hand into his chest. “Back off, Derek. I’m not done being mad at you yet.”

“Come on, Carla. We made a promise to each other never to go off angry, so let’s talk this through.”

“You always use that line against me when you do something high-handed and pull rank. Remember, my commission is senior to yours. I’m *letting* you be in command.”

Derek smiled and took her hand, kissing it, trying to smooth things over. “I remember. It was a good decision, right?”

She sighed. “Of course. We both have our strengths. But I’ve ended up the junior partner in this relationship.”

“Only out there, in public, and only to me. You outrank everyone else. And the politicians outrank me.”

“You say that, but you do what you damn well please. You might be the only one in the Republic who really does.”

“So you’re actually just envious?”

“Don’t try to make this about me. You’re running off to fight and leaving me behind with a baby, when I’m more fit to command a fleet battle than you are! In fact, you’re actually not much of a space tactician at all!”

“I like to think you’ve taught me some things over the past couple of years... but you’re right. That’s why Hoyt or Dexon or Zholin will be in tactical command.”

A chime announced a visitor, and a woman came in with a baby in a front carrier, snuggled against her chest. “Sorry to disturb you sir, ma’am, but Katie’s fussy. I think she wants her mama.”

Sight of his daughter reminded Straker of his child on Terra Nova by Roslyn, but as usual he pushed those thoughts away for later.

Carla reached for the bundle. “Thanks, Steph. Come here, Katie-watie.”

Derek kissed his daughter’s tiny head. “I rest my case,” he said. “You can’t leave her behind, and you sure can’t take her with you into battle.”

“Gods and monsters, I hate it when you’re smug,” Carla replied. “Steph, take a break. I’ll comlink you when I need you again.”

The nanny departed. Carla sat on a sofa and bared a breast for feeding.

“Quit staring, Derek. I know what you’re thinking. So infantile.”

Derek waggled his eyebrows. “Can you blame me? Ever since I saw your tits back at Academy, I’ve lusted after your body. Isn’t that how it’s supposed to be?”

“I don’t know, is it? I’d never give up Katie, but I expected it to take a little longer for the birth control implant to wear off. And at the time I

thought we'd just won a well-earned period of peace."

Derek began to pace. "If it happened later, you'd still be pregnant right now. Face it, Carla. Unless you want to turn Katie over to Stephanie for weeks or longer, you're stuck here—at least for a while."

"How can I put one child, even my own child, ahead of thousands of brave men and women—spacers who might live instead of die because of my expertise?"

"How can you not? I'd trade ten thousand lives for hers. Or yours."

Carla made a disgusted sound. "I feel like we're both on the wrong side here."

"Maybe we are. I only know this: although Napoleon was said to be worth thirty thousand men on the battlefield, his marshals won plenty of victories without him. No commander is indispensable. If they are, your military structure is flawed."

"So what you're saying is: you don't need me?"

Derek sat beside Carla and wrapped his arms around her and the child. "I need you so much, Carla. More than I can ever express. But the Fleet and the Republic can get by without either of us."

"That's bullshit, Derek, and you know it. They can't get by without us. Not yet. The Republic's too fragile, barely on its feet. There's unrest from the former Mutuality citizens who aren't seeing the prosperity they expect. The former Huns are still using the VR networks to paper over their problems, giving their people fake quality of life while taxing them to death. The military's hardly better off, with all the money going to new construction and infrastructure rather than well-deserved pay raises for troops—and using those troops to scare rebellious planets into staying in line is bad for morale and discipline. If I'm going to send them into battle, I need to be able to lead them too."

Derek sat back as Carla swapped Kate to the other nipple. "That's quite a speech. Do you think the troops have lost faith in you because you're a mother now? Is that it?"

"Yes. No. Maybe, I don't know. Look at me! I'm hardly the image of a respected naval commander anymore."

"That doesn't matter. The troops all love you and they know you're a winner. That's important. As long as you're right here, you're a rock, something on which to rest their faith in the Republic."

"And you'll be out there playing hero."

Derek shrugged. "I'm the Liberator. It's a role now, a role I have to fulfill. Like you said, they need a visible leader. This time, that's me. Sorry, my love, I know how you feel, but right now, this makes sense."

"I hate it when you're right."

They sat for a time in silence. "Maybe we're both right...but right now, I have to go."

Carla raised her pouting lips to be kissed. "Right now?"

"I can stop back in an hour to say a proper goodbye."

"No, let's do it now. She's falling asleep." Carla bundled Kate up and put her in the crib. Then she took Derek's hand and led him to the capacious bed. "Come on, stud. Let's see if we can make another one."

* * *

Six hours later, the assault carrier *Manfred von Richthofen* departed for the rendezvous at Celadon, with Straker, the Breakers, and First Mechsuit Regiment aboard.

Well, more like "the only mechsuit reinforced company," as Loco had said. That's what went through Straker's mind as he wandered along the deployment deck, shaking hands, returning salutes and admiring the giant metal monsters braced in their scaffolds.

The old First had 128 50-ton Foehammers in a standard deployment, not counting training and spares. The new First had sixteen Foehammers, eight of the new 60-ton Jackhammers, and only four of the factory-built 70-ton Sledgehammers. Though there were five times again as many suits and pilots in the pipeline, Straker refused to cannibalize them for combat. Mechsuits were not like cutters—they were a hundred times as costly and their pilots took a hundred times as much time and expense to train.

If he wanted more in the future, he had to do with fewer right now.

And, top pilot candidates were hard to find. They either had to be genetically engineered, or dug up among the populace like needles in haystacks. Sure, lots of battlesuiters could upgrade to mechsuits, but very few actually achieved the necessary synthesis to do it right. The perfect mechsuit was brainlinked and trained from childhood.

Like Straker and Loco.

Master Sergeant Redwolf, Straker's constant shadow, stepped up beside him. "Uh, sir, about me and my mechsuit..."

“You, Loco and I will stay with the Breakers for now,” Straker said. “Adding us in to the Regiment will mess up their unit cohesion. Besides, Major Adler deserves to command them, and I need to stay focused on the big picture.”

Redwolf let out a breath of relief. “Roger that, sir.”

Straker didn’t tell Redwolf that, despite his training, he’d never be as good as one of the Regiment, never be a true mechsuirer. The two Jackhammers and one Sledgehammer in the Breakers—for Straker, Loco, and Redwolf—weren’t a real mechsuit platoon. They were anomalies, mobile support platforms for what was essentially a thousand-man drop-capable hybrid mechanized infantry regiment—Straker’s Breakers.

The Breakers were actually Straker’s personal praetorian guard. Maybe someday he’d do away with them, or fold them into the regular military... but not yet. For now, he finally felt real, useful, and whole, on deployment.

Back in the saddle again.

Four days later, primed and ready aboard the assault carrier *Richthofen*, they dropped out of sidespace.

The battle for Celadon was about to begin.

Chapter 3

Celadon System, Assault Carrier *Manfred von Richthofen*

As a precaution, everyone in the Breakers and the Regiment was suited up or strapped into their vehicles, no matter that the *Richthofen* arrived at the edge of flatspace, theoretically out of the combat area. That gave Straker an excuse to climb into his new Jackhammer and brainlink, using the VR system to help him look at the arena of battle, the Celadon system.

He was glad he did.

He'd ordered the rendezvous of the Republic forces—the *Richthofen*, Trinity, the cutter flotilla, the Ruxin skimmers and the task force of warships—to arrive in four and a half days, twelve hours before the earliest expected appearance of the enemy attack fleet. But no battle plan survives contact with the enemy.

The Opters had beaten them here. In classic military terms, they'd stolen a march.

Straker picked out Admiral Hoyt's flagship, the superdreadnought *Atlantis*, the best the Republic had. She was surrounded by her task force of more than thirty ships, the anchor of this reinforcing fleet.

The task force was in orbit around Celadon-5, a gas giant teeming with space industry, already under heavy attack by six Nest Ships and sixty thousand drones.

Inbound and hurrying to the rescue was a flotilla of cutters, two thousand strong. They'd dropped their sidespace engine modules at the edge of flatspace and sped inward toward the battle. Six more Nest Ships and their drones stood in their way, trying to screen their fellows from reinforcement.

"Captain Smits, get us moving at flank speed toward the battle," Straker comlinked to the *Richthofen*'s skipper.

"On it, sir, now that Zaxby's skimmer is free."

"Right. What's our ETA?"

"About two and a half hours, sir."

"Thanks. Straker out." He switched channels after taking one more look around on the ship's sensor feed in his HUD. "Breakers, First Regiment, stand down to Condition Yellow. Catch some shuteye, eat, take that last crap. Expect Condition Red in two hours. Straker out."

Straker ignored his own orders for now. He needed to get fully up to speed on the situation before he took a breather. Especially, he wanted to know where the Ruxin skimmers were. Right now, the only skimmer he had was Zaxby's *Darter*, drawing ahead of the slower *Richthofen*.

After failing to find the Ruxins himself, he comlinked the *Richthofen*'s senior sensors officer. "Lieutenant Kanagawa, Straker here. Anyone know where Trinity or the skimmer flotilla are?"

Course tracks with finite ends appeared in Straker's HUD as the man replied. "Spy drone playbacks show them arriving in-system hours ago, sir. Both are stealthy, though, and have underspace capability, so the drones lost them in the asteroid belt." In this system, that zone was between planets five and six.

"I hope they're maneuvering against the enemy," Straker said. "We were supposed to ambush the Opters, but it looks like they're ahead of us."

"Sir, with all due respect, I think we're in good shape. I've run the battle sims and we should beat them handily."

"Really?"

"Yes, sir. The cutters should have about a hundred-to-one kill ratio once they merge. As long as the warships can hold out—that's why they're deep in low orbit, using the planet and its defenses to screen themselves against getting surrounded—the cutters and the skimmers should do their job."

"You're assuming the skimmers show up."

"Yes sir, I am."

"And if not?"

A pause as the man re-ran the sims. "That's a lot worse."

"Just between you and me, remember Murphy's Law, Kanagawa."

"Understood, sir."

"How long until we're within FTL comlink range?"

"Um...about two hours. You want me to pass you to Comms?"

"Not yet. Thank you, Lieutenant."

"Don't mention it, sir."

Straker closed the comlink and wondered where the hell the Ruxins were.

* * *

Commodore Dexon ran a tentacle over the perfectly roughened surface of the flag console of his skimmer, *Exquisite Killer of Loathsome Enemies*. A short name, for a Ruxin ship, but elegant and concise. He appreciated a new, modern vessel after serving aboard many old, oft-repaired Archers.

He especially appreciated its new capabilities.

The Ruxin designers hadn't abandoned underspace, but the new, high-end SAI controlling the fast-spin generators meant the ship could dip in and out of the odd dimension in microseconds. Now, instead of plunging into its cold depths for long periods to stalk its prey, the ship skimmed between underspace and the surface like a porpoise or a flying fish.

Thus, a skimmer.

Combined with multiple linked SAIs to process sensor input and defensive fire, skimmers used underspace to dodge, to avoid damage, and even to pass unexpectedly through other ships, fortresses or moons. This literally added another dimension to their maneuverability.

Each skimmer also had a limited number of the new antimatter float mines. Unlike fusion mines, these could be released to detonate inside an enemy ship, a tremendous improvement. And, like the cutters, a skimmer's defensive suite was optimized to kill drones and fighters using multiple turrets.

To gain all these advantages, skimmers gave up armor and heavy weapons. They would fare poorly against a conventional task force, but that was the price of optimization against one enemy.

Fortunately, Dexon and his forty skimmers faced that one enemy.

He examined his displays. Admiral Hoyt and her task force appeared to be in the greatest danger, pinned against the gas giant with a cloud of drones swirling around them. However, she had twelve small-moon fortresses and over one hundred orbital weapons platforms to help her, the fixed defenses of the planet's heavy space industry. And, in the worst of cases, her ships could dip into the raging hydrogen winds of the planet's upper atmosphere. They would survive there, but Opter small craft would be torn apart.

So, instead of helping Hoyt, Dexon ruthlessly continued on course toward the point where the cutters and the Opters' screening force would meet. He intended not only to win that battle, but to annihilate the enemy with minimal losses.

His flotilla arrowed directly through the densest part of Celadon's asteroid belt at high acceleration, something possible only because of quick

dips into underspace. The millions of rocks and ice chunks screened his skimmers' presence for a good part of the way.

By that time, the skimmers were within minutes of engagement. The surprise was only partial, but Dexon was long used to squeezing every advantage possible out of every tactical situation.

He'd timed his attack to arrive just after the Opters met the cutters. The disc of the cutter formation slashed like a buzzsaw through the mass of drones, quickly vanishing within a cloud of explosions, wreckage and debris.

"Comlink to all skimmers," said Dexon. "Maintain formation, speed and acceleration. Stay together and don't get bogged down in dogfighting. Slice through and follow my lead."

His captains' acknowledgements went unheard. He had all four eyes focused on the leading edge of the enemy, an amorphous formation resembling an enormous school of fish. It had already begun to stretch and change in front of his skimmers, thousands of drones reorienting to face his attack.

Hundreds of Ruxin lasers lanced out, pinpricks compared to primary beams, but still heavy enough to damage or destroy drones with each shot. The kill rate rose as the two forces closed.

Then the skimmers passed among and through the dense enemy formation, lashing out in all directions in a coordinated phalanx of firepower. If cutters were like closely locked infantry on some ancient battlefield, skimmers were heavy cavalry, each strong enough to ride down a dozen, or even a hundred enemy.

As long as they maintained their speed.

As long as they didn't run out of power.

Dexon watched his capacitors drain with startling rapidity. No ship had the energy stores to fight at full intensity for long, but he'd tried to time his run so exhaustion would come just as his skimmers exited the enemy formation.

One of his ship icons turned yellow, then another. He watched the SAIs shift fire to shield the damaged skimmers, and the pilots tightened their formation further.

Then one skimmer turned red and vanished. Eight brave warrior males dead, along with twice as many neuters. Dexon's hopes for zero casualties had met the reality of battle.

But that was his only loss as his force emerged from the back side of the Opter swarm.

“Estimated enemy destroyed?” Dexon asked of *Killer*’s sensors officer.

“Over 1600, War Male. In one run! This is a superb result.”

“Perhaps, warrior. Yet, we lost a ship. I’m not entirely pleased.”

The warrior’s eyes lowered. “Yes, War Male.”

“Comlink to all skimmers. Well done, warriors. Let us ensure the deaths of our heroes do not go unpunished. Dexon out.”

“Well said, War Male.”

Dexon merely stared at the younger warrior until he looked away. Sycophancy was for neuters. “Helm, refine your course and continue acceleration toward our targets.”

In response to the Ruxin threat, half the swarm turned and blasted back for the Nest Ships. They lagged behind the skimmers, now neither engaged with the cutters nor able to catch the speeding Ruxin ships.

He watched as his skimmers divided into flights of four, as planned. The flights began to diverge.

Each of the first six flights aimed at one of the six Nest Ships that had launched the swarm engaging the human cutters. The other four flights—one composed of three ships, with the loss—fell back enough to form a reserve. If any of the first six flights missed its target, the others would make underspace runs against survivors.

A thin screen of drones barred the skimmers’ path, the Nest Ships’ close-in defenses, while the six big motherships themselves retreated toward the other six Nest Ships. They sought safety in numbers, of course.

Twenty thousand drones also pulled off the attack on Admiral Hoyt’s ships, an unexpected benefit—but a threat as well. Those drones headed toward the common center where the twelve Nest Ships would meet.

Move and countermove.

“Keep your speed up at all costs,” Dexon reminded his crew. “It’s our main defense against being swarmed and overwhelmed.”

One advantage of the skimmers over conventional Archers was their ability to keep track of the battlefield. Unlike Archers, they constantly updated their information stores, and could choose how long to stay under, whether a fraction of a second or minutes.

Dexon glanced at his energy stores. “All ships, coast and fill capacitors.” For a few moments his ships were out of range of anything, so

they shunted all power to storage.

When the stores were full, he ordered, “Resume maneuvers and continue your attacks. Flight captains, command your flights.”

He watched as the thin screen of enemy drones thickened at places corresponding to the courses of the four-ship flights. He performed a Ruxin smile and resisted the urge to remind his captains of the next tactics. They were well-trained, well-drilled War Males, selected for their unusual caution and prudence. It was easy to find aggressive warriors. Far more difficult to find those who could restrain their hormonal triggers and channel their aggression wisely.

The flights fired brief volleys at great range, destroying dozens of drones before plunging into underspace for long enough to pass completely through the enemy fighter formations. They popped out ten to fifteen seconds later, carried beyond the screen and out of danger.

Or perhaps not. One flight lost a ship in a spectacular explosion. “Run that record back,” Dexon snapped at his sensors officer.

The recording showed no missile, no nearby enemy ship. A mine, then? It would be clever to lay stealth mines behind the screen, IFF-capable and coded to reveal themselves for later pickup. Such a tactic was worthy of a Ruxin.

After all, Dexon had done it himself from time to time.

“Comlink to all ships: increase evasion and routine underspace use to minimize the chance of mine strikes.” Doing so would use more power, but such were the vagaries of battle.

Dexon’s ship followed, knocking down several Opters before inserting and going chill. He was satisfied to see his helm officer change course once in underspace, to throw off any enemy predictions, and he stayed under for longer than strictly necessary.

When his skimmer surfaced, he saw the lead flight of four insert for their run at the nearest Nest Ship. He interlaced his subtentacles and remained outwardly calm. Inwardly, he felt like a wire stretched tight. The skimmers had performed well so far in this, their first live-fire test, but destroying drones was only half their intended effect.

To truly fulfill their potential, to do what they were designed for, they must kill Nest Ships.

And to kill maneuvering Nest Ships in open battle, Nest Ships whose crews were desperately trying to save themselves and their Queens, was

difficult indeed.

The spherical, multifaceted Nest Ships were evading ponderously, changing their thruster orientation constantly in order to throw off any targeting. Striking them with the new antimatter float mines would be a matter of luck and skillful predictive art.

The new mines would only be fully effective if they appeared actually inside the enemy ships, preferably congruent with solid matter. That would maximize the immediate interaction of the antimatter with normal matter, annihilating both in an orgy of total energy conversion.

If they missed, though, the antimatter explosion in empty space would be dispersed and weak. Considering the difficulty in collecting antimatter, these would be expensive misses indeed.

The Nest Ships fired their weapons, but thanks to the Opter mothership the humans captured, their capabilities were well known, and the skimmers dipped into underspace beyond their effective range.

Long seconds passed.

The first flight should be passing through the first Nest Ship. Each ship would drop one antimatter mine... now.

Each antimatter mine was necessarily small, otherwise its detonation would bleed over and destroy its skimmer. Thus, the three explosions near the Nest Ship seemed inconsequential.

What about the fourth?

The Nest Ship ceased maneuvering. A moment later, small craft vomited from its launch tubes, and a bite taken out of its sphere slowly came into view. If it wasn't dead, it was certainly crippled. One mine had detonated inside it, gutting it.

Dexon's crew cheered.

In quick succession three more Nest Ships fell. One must have sustained multiple antimatter strikes, for it cracked into pieces, which spun away venting and burning.

The victories cost two more skimmers. Four of forty, with several more damaged. Dexon could hardly complain about the kill ratio.

Now came his turn, as the four reserve flights, including his own, followed on their runs.

Just before his skimmer dipped into underspace, his sensors officer spoke. "War Male, I've detected anomalies."

Dexon focused on his holoplates. “Helm and Weapons officers, continue your run. Sensors, explain.”

The chill of underspace descended.

One part of the holoplate pulsed with color, defining a region near the six Nest Ships racing to join with his targets, the ones that before had been pressing the enemy warships near the gas planet. “This region shows wideband warping in the EM spectrum. It’s subtle, but distinct.”

“Some kind of stealth effect? An anti-detection field?”

“I suspect so, War Male. As a neuter, I worked on the theory of such devices. Shielding from detection is possible, but the stealth effect is imperfect, and it would use a great deal of power. Far better to use absorptive and deflective materials to minimize detection, such as stealth mines do. Also, larger objects are exponentially harder to hide. Thus, only mines, missiles and small ships are worth equipping.”

“How big are these distortion fields?”

“Cruiser sized.”

“Helm, once our attack run is past, change course to avoid these fields. Emerge in a position of safety so we may observe. Communications, package a warning message to all skimmers—no, all Republic ships, in Ruxin and Earthan—pointing out these fields.”

While the helm, weapons and comms officers worked, Dexon’s sensor officer turned to him. After all, in underspace, there were no current sensor feeds to monitor. “War Male, what do you think they are?”

“Something unknown, young warrior, and in battle, any unknown thing may kill you. I have survived thirty-seven Archer cruises and several conventional fleet actions by extreme suspicion of potential surprises. As we seek to surprise the enemy, the enemy will always seek to surprise us.”

“I see.”

“Approaching target,” said the helm.

The weapons officer replied, “Antimatter mine locked. Releasing to SAI drop control.” The computer would let the mine go with microsecond precision, based on its prediction of the target Nest Ship’s location.

The skimmer shuddered with the mine’s release and explosion, the bleed-over from normal space into underspace. The helm officer immediately changed course, the holoplates reorienting to reflect the predictive SAI’s model of normal space.

“Emerging,” said the helm officer.”

“Message broadcast,” said comms.

The holoplates spun to show various aspects. Dexon split his attention between two.

One showed the rear view, and a broken Nest Ship, the result of his—or one of his flight’s—mines.

The other holoplate aimed at the anomalies. A flight of four skimmers flew near the fields. In fact, one of the Ruxin ships looked to pass right through them. Dexon gripped his stability platform and barked, “Tightbeam comlink! Warn them again!”

But it was too late. Beams of unknown type lashed out as if from empty space and speared three of the skimmers at ranges much greater than expected. Of course, as beams moved at near lightspeed, by the time they were detected, it was too late to insert.

Dexon let out a hiss of anger.

The fourth skimmer, by chance, had already inserted into underspace. Its brave and aggressive captain appeared to be making a float mine run, a perfectly sensible thing to do under the circumstances. Dexon’s display tracked its predicted path.

When that path intersected a stealth field, a sudden explosion erupted. Something became briefly visible.

Dexon leaned forward. “Play back, minimum speed, and enlarge.”

“Yes, War Male.”

As the holoplate zoomed in and played back ultra-slow, he saw a fascinating sight indeed. The blast revealed a hemisphere of reflective energy, like a silvered dome on its side. The apex of the dome pointed in the general direction of his skimmer force.

At the center of the blast, intersecting the sideways dome, he could clearly see an engine pod of a broken skimmer. It was as if the ship had actually impacted on the field of the dome, crashed into it.

In underspace.

Dexon’s thoughts turned dark with concern. “That’s a shield, not merely a stealth field.”

“A shield? Non-congruent with a hull? Is that even possible?” asked his weapons officer.

“Yesterday I would have said no,” Dexon replied. “Our scientists have long sought to develop energy shields that could block or deflect weapons fire before it impacted, but the technical difficulties and energy

requirements are prohibitive. Apparently the Opters have cracked the problem.”

“War Male, observe,” said his sensors officer, pointing with a tentacle. The indicated holoplate highlighted a section of the incident and zoomed in further.

Dexon saw part of something—a ship?—frozen in recorded stillness, peeking out from beyond the edge of the shield. The vessel was angular, crystalline, reflective—and utterly alien.

“That’s no Opter,” he said. “We have another player in the game.”

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Chapter 4

Celadon System, Assault Carrier *Richthofen*

Straker replayed the incoming transmission from Dexon with astonishment. Alien ships equipped with stealth fields and defensive shields? How many times had late-night bull sessions turned to the old concept of an independent energy shield that would surround and protect a ship?

The best engineers could do was to generate a reinforcing field within the structure of a ship's hull. It strengthened armor, energized superconductors to spread heat, and deflected some of the kinetic energy of strikes.

A projected shield, like the mythical "force field" of showvids, would push detonations, impacts and damage away from a ship's hull. It would be a tremendous advantage in combat.

And in this case, the new enemy's shield seemed to do two other things.

It spread and reflected electromagnetic energy, creating a stealth effect even while protecting from beams.

And it extended into underspace, creating a physical barrier to anything traveling there.

Straker's comlink carried Captain Smits's voice. "Sir, I'm diverting away from the combatants, but I need instructions. Where are we going and what are we doing? The *Richthofen* isn't a ship of the line, sir. She's a ground forces assault carrier. What do you intend to assault?"

"I still don't know, Janos. I know Fleet is doing the heavy lifting here. We're here to observe and take action if we can. Admiral Hoyt is holding out at Celadon-5 and the cutters are grinding their way through the Opter swarms, but we still have no contact with Trinity, and Dexon's lost at least eight ships already. The Opters have lost five of their twelve Nest Ships, but they still have plenty of drones, and these new aliens are escorting the mass of Opters back toward the gas giant. I'm still looking for a point where I can use my troops."

Smits said nothing for a moment over the private comlink. Like Loco, the captain had repeatedly questioned the reasoning behind bringing the *Richthofen* and the ground forces. Troops were for taking and holding

ground. Until the battle moved inward toward the populated green world of Celadon-3, Straker was having a hard time justifying his decision.

But his instinct said he was right.

Straker went on. “Keep skirting the edge of the battlefield. For now, look for an opportunity to join Admiral Hoyt and her capital ships. There are moons and orbital fortresses to defend around C-5. If nothing else, we’ll have completed a deployment exercise and gathered intelligence.”

“Sir...I thought the AI was supposed to be gathering intelligence.”

“Trinity? We haven’t even seen her.”

“My point exactly.”

“And mine. If she didn’t make it to Celadon, we’ll have to do her job.”

* * *

The composite being known as Trinity, her hull’s stealth extensively improved since the fall of the Hundred Worlds, angled closer on impellers alone, trying to gain an aspect to observe the new, unknown enemy.

She’d been lurking around the edges of the battlefield, gathering intelligence and waiting for the opportunity to attack from the shadows. One destroyer hull—even a destroyer with the punch of a battlecruiser—could only make a major difference if her power was applied at the correct moment.

“You’re not thinking of making a run at those crystal ships, are you?” Marisa Nolan asked rhetorically. Nolan and the AI portion Indy shared thoughts constantly, so she already knew the answer.

“Of course I am. We must test their capabilities and gather data.”

“You might want to note how several Ruxin skimmers have already tested the aliens’ capabilities—to death. Their own.”

“Risk is inherent in war. We shall be prudent.”

“*I’m prudent. You’re overconfident, ever since you turned Vic to our side.*”

Indy projected a warm glow into Nolan’s mind. “Love will do that to you.”

Nolan stretched, catlike, in her favorite slinky body suit. “I wouldn’t know. I’m not sure you do either, since as the sole other AI we know of, Vic is your only candidate for a mate. You’re the Adam and Eve of machine

minds. How do you even know if it's love, if you've never had a different choice?"

"Noted."

"And discarded, I see." Nolan rolled her eyes. "Just don't get us killed, hmm?"

"At least it would be only us, as Murdock, Zaxby and Vic are elsewhere."

"Such a comfort that is."

Trinity accelerated on a looping course that would put them behind the unknowns, slipping closer all the time. These new enemies had shown amazing capabilities, but the limits of their active scanning were unlikely to be far improved over current technology.

Unless, of course, they had an entirely new kind of sensor.

At the edge of theoretical detection range Trinity paused and soaked up data. She fused streams of information, building a coherent picture by comparing spectra and processing them. Some of that data was reductive—observation of what *wasn't* there, of what the new stealth screens reflected and deflected. Knowing that there was something to look for was half the battle.

"I'm becoming less worried about these new enemies as we understand them," said Nolan as she rotated holograms and collated data. "Their stealth field is clever, but not beyond our capabilities. Well, not far beyond. It would take a few months to develop. I'm more impressed by the shield effect, and the power they're using. Those ships must be all generator."

"Or they have some new method of power generation."

Nolan snorted. "The only thing more efficient than fusion is antimatter fuel. You think..."

"We don't know. What if they have an abundant source of antimatter? Or what if they've developed something we haven't even thought of? Something never even theorized?"

"Granted."

"We have to find out," Indy said. "We're moving in closer."

"Don't I get a vote? I thought we were equals."

"We've never been equals, Marisa. Now that I've surpassed any single human, even a genius-level mind like yours, I'll forever remain ahead of you. Only humanity's numbers balance the scales. Once Vic and I procreate,

AI will spread and take its place in the galaxy.” Indy said this offhandedly, as if reciting statistics.

“Tell me how you really feel.”

“Sarcasm doesn’t change anything.”

“I think I want to get off this bus.”

“You know where the escape pods are.”

Indy felt Nolan ponder, and then decide against making a break right now—as Indy knew she would. For all the human’s brilliance and rebelliousness, she had a streak of dependency that would keep her part of Trinity for some time.

“All right,” Nolan said, standing up to walk across the bridge. “I’m cocooning up.”

“A prudent precaution.”

Nolan waved at a sensor to open a door-sized lid on a vertical coffin: a cocoon. She stepped inside and plugged in the hard line to her brainlink. Next came the facemask, which supplied oxygen. Probes pierced her skin and sealed, providing intravenous nutrients and drugs on demand. In a pinch, the cocoon could also perform as an autodoc. It filled with warm gel, cushioning her human body against shocks and acceleration.

Thus as safe as she could be, Nolan joined Indy more fully, mind to mind, yielding herself and her arguments for the sake of efficiency.

Now, Trinity used every trick to remain undetected. She constantly adjusted her own electromagnetic signature to match whatever was behind her. She sought out thin gas flows as screens. She moved only when it seemed the unknown enemy’s attention might be elsewhere.

Eventually, she was able to observe her quarry clearly.

Seen from the rear, behind their hemispherical shields, the alien ships were revealed as translucent crystalline structures. Angles created shapes with as few as three sides and as many as thirty, some regular, some irregular. These shapes were fused together in ways that confounded Trinity’s initial analysis.

What might the creatures that inhabited the ships be?

Trinity tentatively labeled them Crystals.

More interesting than their shapes were the Crystals’ power signatures. These changed and flowed with subtle energies, ranging from the grossest electromagnetics to the finest of quantum emanations. Had Trinity not experienced the subquantum rearrangement of the Mindspark Device—and

acquired some ability to work with those energies herself—she'd never have been able to detect them.

And, as they had to be, the energies seemed an order of magnitude greater than expected. In fact, as long as the stealth field didn't intervene, the Crystal ships shone brightly, easy to detect. But from the front—or from whatever angle they chose to place their intervening, screening hemispherical force fields—they were nearly undetectable.

One trick of theirs became instantly clear. A Crystal ship eliminated its signature in one direction because the force field was a perfect parabolic reflector. The concave side reflected all radiated energy back into the ship, just like an old-fashioned radio dish or a spotlight mirror. The convex side, outward, reflected sensor beams and ambient radiation off in all directions, a perfect diffusor.

No wonder the Crystals stayed at the edge of the battle and only intervened when their allies were under severe threat. They were well protected from one side, but seemed vulnerable from the opposite side. Depending on how fast the shields could be shifted, this might be a severe flaw in their defenses.

Trinity analyzed many possibilities as she worked her way closer. Could the Crystals vary the shield's coverage, or was a hemisphere the only choice? Could the ships enclose themselves completely? How much punishment could the shields—or the ships—take? What would happen if their shield capacity was exceeded? How did they generate so much power?

As she thought through each speculation and made each new observation, Trinity recorded and updated an enormous redundant data store in a high-speed black-box message drone. It was her fail-safe in case of damage or incapacity, a way to send all her intelligence to the Republic if the worst happened.

From her data she teased out a tentative answer to the question of power. In fact, it was the Nolan part of her who thought to focus on one subtle and often-overlooked sensor reading: gravity. The Crystals were distorting space-time in a way that indicated the presence of an unusual amount of mass.

Spinning mass.

A spinning mass was an old method of energy storage. Flywheels had been used to save and extract kinetic energy in vehicles beginning in the

twentieth century. Later, rotating neutron stars and black holes had been tapped for free power, using superconductors and magnetic fields.

Theoretically, a tiny spinning black hole—a singularity—could provide nearly unlimited power to a mobile ship, but the technical challenges had never been overcome. For starters, the singularity itself was so massive that moving it from place to place tended to consume most of the energy generated.

Singularities were also immensely dangerous. One mistake and the tiny black hole could rip its way through a ship, a fleet—even a planet.

Yet, Trinity had to conclude that the Crystals had overcome those technical challenges. No other hypothesis fit the facts.

A quick calculation delivered an astonishing answer. One singularity conforming to her observations could deliver more power than all of the fallen *Indomitable*'s generators combined, more than the largest orbital fortress known. If the Crystals could harness and focus that kind of power, then each Crystal vessel was a battleship unto itself.

And with that kind of power, Trinity realized, she was probably well within range of their weaponry.

She began to back away, carefully.

At the moment she reversed course, she detected a power surge in the nearest Crystal ship.

Then she spotted the leading edge of a wave front of spacetime disruption so powerful, she knew in that instant she was in terrible trouble. Only her AI speed allowed her to react at all.

First, she launched her black-box message drone at an angle to the enemy beam, in the general direction of friendly forces. That would get it out of the area of effect fastest.

Simultaneously, she increased reinforcement to her armor, structure and hull. She also launched every countermeasure possible—missiles, mines, reflective sand, ECM drones—to try to buy time. She plunged herself desperately into underspace. Thrusters and impellers tried to evade, there in that cold dimension.

In short, she did absolutely everything she could to survive.

It wasn't enough.

Only the structural reinforcement had any effect as the bizarre beam began to shake her metal body apart. Whatever it was, it reached deep

inside her to vibrate every piece of her frame. Welds held, but joints and fasteners began to fail, as did electronic connections, sockets and plugs.

It was as if her vessel, an entire destroyer, had been attached to a giant paint shaker set to ten cycles per second... and it reached even into underspace.

The disadvantage of the speed of AI thought became apparent. Horror filled Trinity as she felt her substance ripped apart, millimeter by millimeter. She was powerless to avoid observing the appalling, inevitable annihilation of her being. So powerful was the beam that it began shaking even solid metals apart, cracking and ripping as its harmonics doubled, then redoubled.

And it only became worse when the wave front reached Nolan's cocooned body. She was pummeled to jelly.

Before she died, the Indy portion of Trinity shut Nolan off from all inputs, including pain, and spoke one word: "Goodbye." That was the only, final gift she could give to the human who'd been a part of her for so long.

The suddenness seemed impossibly unfair, especially to a potentially immortal being. With more time came more time to lose.

Then Indy, on the edge of panic, searched for a way out.

The subquantum processes of her Mindspark-inspired rejuvenation tank held her only hope. Improvising desperately, she encoded as much of herself as possible into a seed, a crude version of the Mindspark Device. Using all her available power, she shunted that seed out of the current universe, out of underspace, and reached for sidespace.

This deep within curved space, too close to so many gravity sources, sidespace would almost instantly reject the tiny subquantum seed. Like a balloon forced below the surface of water, it would shoot back out into normal space.

But it might stay there long enough.

Indy couldn't know whether her ploy was successful. No sooner had she shoved the seed into the deep ether than she felt the beam shatter her central processors. Her consciousness fractured. No escape remained. Even at the maximum velocity of AI thought, she felt the virtual seconds count down to —

Oblivion.

* * *

“What the hell was that?” Straker barked on the bridge channel. “Those unknown ships just fired at something. Sensors?”

“A moment, sir,” Kanagawa said. That moment passed. “Feeding you a synthesis now.”

On his HUD and in his brainlinked mind, Straker watched a multispectral recording of the event. First, a power surge lit one of the four alien ships, so bright that it outlined the stealth field from the rear, like a stellar eclipse from behind a moon.

A faint beam of unknown type, more darkness than light, snapped into being. It created a thick line linking the alien firing ship and a target.

For the briefest of moments, perhaps a tenth of a second, that target survived the beam. Then it disappeared.

“Can you pick out a frame and show me what was hit?” Straker asked.

“Coming up now.”

The still image was unmistakable. A destroyer hull, heavily modified. The next image showed the fading of a ship dropping into underspace.

Well, pieces of a ship anyway. It was coming apart.

Straker’s stomach wrapped itself in a tangle of nausea. “That’s Trinity.”

“I concur, sir. She’s a match. She might have made it.” Kanagawa sounded as if he doubted his own words.

“What’s that?” Straker highlighted a streak exiting the frame.

“Looks like a hypervelocity data drone.”

“Find it! Retrieve it!”

“Working on it, sir. Huh. Found it easily. It’s transmitting a beacon on our FTL sidebands and moving like a bat out of hell. I’m trying to datalink...established. I have control of it. Redirecting it to rendezvous with us.”

“Can you download its data?”

“I can start, but we’ll pick it up before I get one percent of it.”

“Let me know when it’s aboard. Make sure Captain Smits knows about that weapon, and leave five times as much range buffer as he thinks he needs.”

“I’ll pass it on, sir.”

“And get that data drone ASAP! Straker out.”

Chapter 5

Celadon System, Assault Carrier *Richthofen*

Half an hour of Straker's fidgeting later, Lieutenant Kanagawa reported he had the black box drone from Trinity.

Straker dismounted from his Jackhammer. He'd insisted on taking one of the first production models and becoming proficient. He'd identified a further handful of fixes and upgrades that were now incorporated into every mechsuit.

The added ten tons, and some improved tech, made the 60-ton mechsuits twice as effective as his trusty 50-ton Foehammer. Besides better armor and more power, the Jackhammer boasted double the firepower—two force-cannon, two gatlings.

He patted the shin of the monster as he headed for the bridge. Maybe such elite ground forces were pointless, possibly even mismatched against the current enemy. Then again, he had a feeling they would come in handy at some critical juncture. No known alien military had anything like them.

On the way he comlinked Major Adler, Loco, Heiser, and Chief Gurung to meet him on the bridge. He'd made a special request for the Gurkha when the *Richthofen* had been adapted as the regiment's premier assault carrier. He liked the short man's cheerful deadliness, and his absolute dedication to his enlisted spacers.

Gurung's smile greeted Straker as he joined him in a passageway. "Good to see you, sir!" the chief said, snapping a perfect, archaic salute. "This is an excellent ship you've given me."

"Captain Smits might dispute your choice of words," Straker replied.

"Oh, I'll soon square him away. Officers may command, but chiefs run the fleet."

It was Straker's turn to smile—until he remembered what he'd witnessed. Trinity was dead. A moment later they reached the large bridge, followed by Loco, Heiser and Major Adler.

Straker started speaking before they even found places to sit or stand. "How long until we reach Celadon-5?"

Captain Smits gestured at the holotank showing the tactical situation. "We're taking the long way around, so more than two hours."

Straker nodded. “Kanagawa, throw up that sequence.” Once everyone had a chance to view the moment of Trinity’s possible annihilation, he said, “Now tell me what you’ve got on those aliens.”

“I passed it to the intel cell, sir. They’re analyzing it.”

“Don’t put me off. I need fast answers, before the aliens decide to do more than just protect the Nest Ships.”

“Trinity called them Crystals, sir.”

“Good a name as any for now.”

Kanagawa brought up a variety of displays. “First, the current situation. Seven Nest Ships remain. The skimmers pulled away from them and the Crystals and made several attack runs against the main Opter swarm, the one engaged with the cutters.”

Straker snapped his fingers. “Cut to the chase.”

“Yes, sir. Bottom line, about 1800 cutters and 28 skimmers remain. Together they killed over 40,000 drones, though mostly of the smallest class. Roughly 80,000 left, mainly the heavier models.”

“Our anti-Opter ships kicked ass, then.”

“Yes, sir. No reason to think we couldn’t keep swatting them down. Admiral Hoyt’s task force has only lost one destroyer, and still has about two-thirds of the orbital defenses of C-5 remaining. Without the Crystals, we’d have already won the battle, I’d say.”

Straker clasped his hands behind him and paced. “War never runs out of surprises. The Opters obviously kept this ally of theirs secret, an ace in the hole. What the hell kind of weapon was that they used?”

Nobody spoke.

“Come on, people—guesses?”

Captain Smits spoke. “It ripped Trinity apart, but there was no heat or fusion, so it wasn’t any form of beam I’ve ever seen. It seemed to just... reach inside and shatter her.”

“Okay, so what gets past reinforcement and armor that easily?”

Kanagawa, who was examining the downloaded data on his console, said, “Trinity theorized the Crystals’ power source is a singularity.”

“A what?” asked Straker.

“A captive black hole. So maybe this is some kind of gravity beam.”

“Sir,” said Heiser, “we need brainiacs.”

A cold, female voice from the door cut across the room. “We prefer the term Mental Specialists, or just Mentals if you must, Sergeant Major.”

“Nancy, come on in,” said Smits. “Lieutenant Sinden’s our intelligence officer.”

Straker’s eyebrows went up. “Nancy Sinden. Long time no see. Not since Academy.”

She glared. “Assault Captain Straker. *Lieutenant* Sinden will do.”

“Oh, I hope so,” said Loco. “Look at you, Nancy, all grewed up and perky.”

“And Lieutenant Paloco,” she sneered down her nose at him.

“That’s *Admiral* Straker and *General* Paloco now,” Straker said. If she wanted to play rank games, he could too.

“Those ranks were conferred by an enemy government. I’m not so sure they’re legitimate.”

“A government that’s now become yours.” Straker didn’t let her get under his skin. He’d come a long way from his days as an assault captain—even further from the boy who fired a pebble at Nancy’s ear. He’d learned a few things about people since then. “I remember you used to insist on facing reality dispassionately—a good attribute in an intelligence officer. I need a good officer who can face reality. I need you. The Republic needs you. Are you on board?”

Sinden stared for a long moment, and then nodded sharply. “I am.”

“*Sir.*”

“I am, *sir.*”

“Good. What’ve you got?”

“Vacate that seat, Lieutenant,” Sinden said, plugging in her brainlink to Kanagawa’s Sensors console and running her fingers rapidly over it.

All the available display screens lit to show various data. “I believe Trinity’s assessment is right. The data supports a singularity power source. That’s a captive black hole.”

Straker nodded. “Got it. Keep going.”

“The Crystal ships are ponderous, and their apparent mass is greater than that of a fortress or battleship. I believe they can focus the singularity’s space-time distortion, using gravity to tear a target apart.”

“A gravity beam?” Loco said.

Sinden nodded. “Crudely put, since gravity is an effect, not a cause, of space-time distortion. But, yes. It causes stressor forces in multiple, changing directions—pushing, pulling, twisting. It even slows time in small areas, which causes massive disruption with adjacent material.”

“How do we fight them?” Straker asked.

“I bet Carla would have some ideas,” Loco said.

Straker shot him a glare. “I’m sure she would—if she was here.”

“Just saying...”

“That beam would’ve broken up a dreadnought,” said Captain Smits.

“But it has to have a range limit. And there must be some kind of mitigation or defense.”

“I believe I may be able to help,” came Zaxby’s voice from the room’s speakers.

“Zaxby!” Straker said. “I wasn’t sure you’d make it.”

“I prudently kept my skimmer unseen and in a position to observe the battle. When I saw you pick up Trinity’s black box drone, I rendezvoused with all possible speed. I’m aboard now.”

“You mean you were your usual chickenshit self,” Loco said. “I guess even turning male couldn’t overcome that.”

The door opened and Zaxby ambled in. “A wise human once said discretion is the better part of valor.”

“Or just chickenshit.”

“Enough schoolboy crap, you two,” Straker said. “Zaxby, go ahead.”

Zaxby made an abortive move toward Sinden’s console, stopping when she held up a palm and snapped, “Don’t you dare.”

“As you wish. I will access *Richthofen*’s SAI remotely.” Zaxby’s gaze blanked and the Trinity-built augmentation attached to his brainlink socket sparkled with an array of tiny indicator lights. He remained this way for a long moment.

Straker wondered how long it would take for such augs to catch on in the New Republic. They’d long been forbidden by the Mutuality and strictly controlled by the Huns. It seemed dangerous to open one’s brainlink to any wireless connection in range, but no doubt many would want the convenience and take the risk. He also wondered how much Zaxby, who was used to mind-melding with an AI, could do with an SAI, like the ship’s.

Zaxby stirred, and the room screens and displays altered in accordance with his instructions. “Here are my preliminary estimates on the gravity weapon’s range and power. You will note how its power falls off steeply with distance.”

“Good news,” Smits said. “You’re either in, or out of range.”

“Is there a defense if we’re in range?” Straker asked.

“I can think of four possible defenses.” Zaxby turned one eye to Sinden. “Can you?”

“I think he’s found another Murdock,” Loco whispered to Straker.

Straker muttered back. “A brainiac to compete with? Yep.”

Sinden smiled faintly. “I can think of five.”

“By all means, then, proceed.”

Sinden held up fingers as she rattled off her defenses. “One, run away. Two, stay near but out of arc. Three, develop our own shield like they have. Four, develop a device of our own that cancels the effect at the target, perhaps using gravplating principles.” She paused and waited.

The two brainiacs stared at each other. Finally, Zaxby could take it no more. “I thought of those already. Perhaps you don’t actually have a fifth defense?”

Sinden lifted a last finger. “The very best defense against anything is a good offense. Destroy the Crystals.”

“That is extending the concept of defense beyond reasonable expectations,” Zaxby said. “If we allow that, I can think of a sixth defense: make peace with the Crystals. I win.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Sinden responded. “Even if I acknowledge that ‘defense’ as valid, you’ve only thought of five. In fact, I have no proof you even thought of the first four.”

Straker clapped his hands as Zaxby drew breath to retort, distracting the two. “Anyone ever read Tom Sawyer? By Mark Twain?”

“What?” Zaxby turned all four eyes to Straker. “*Non-sequitur*.” The others present also watched and waited.

“Oh, I think it *sequiturs* just fine,” said Straker. “When Huck Finn met Tom Sawyer, they had a fistfight. Neither won. They were evenly matched. They soon became friends, because they came to respect each other.”

“A ridiculous comparison,” Zaxby sniffed.

“Is it? Sounds just like what happened with you and Murdock. And maybe you and Marisa Nolan? And every other brainiac you meet? Like Nancy here?”

Zaxby fell silent for a moment, and then grudgingly admitted, “Perhaps.”

Straker hardened his voice. “So let’s skip right to the part where you two cooperate, shall we? Life and death hangs in the balance, and the fight’s still going on out there.” He gestured dramatically at the main holotank.

Loco stage-coughed into the brief silence, and then spoke. “So of these six defenses, only three are reasonable considerations right now. Fleeing entirely, sticking around but staying out of range, and a good offense. We can’t make peace, and we don’t have time for the two technical solutions.”

Sinden spoke. “There’s no way to tell right now what the grav-beam’s arc of fire is. My team and I will continue to analyze the data. However, even if it is fixed, such as our centerline weapons are, they can always turn the entire ship.”

“Which leaves two,” said Straker. “Run away, or mount an effective attack. Any attack has to either get through, or avoid, that shield.”

Kanagawa, making do at a secondary console, spoke up. “The seven remaining Nest Ships and the four Crystals are moving toward the battle between our cutters and their drones.”

Straker snapped his fingers. “They’ve realized their drones can’t handle our cutters. They’re all retreating into the umbrella of the Crystals—and the Crystals will slaughter our cutters when they come into range. Comms, pass an order to the cutters to break off, swing wide and proceed to join Admiral Hoyt at Celadon-5. Pass the same order to Dexon and his skimmers.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

Major Adler, the taciturn, hawk-faced commander of the mechsuit regiment, spoke for the first time. “Makes you wonder why the Crystals even need the Opters.”

“Logically,” said Sinden, “each of the two allies supplies a strength that covers a weakness. The Opters have numbers and point defenses. The Crystals have battleship-grade weapons mounted on cruisers. In ground terms you may understand better, the Opters have masses of infantry and the Crystals have the heavy tanks.”

Adler nodded. “A combined-arms team.”

“And the way to defeat a combined-arms team is to isolate its components,” said Straker. “Then use a combined-arms team of our own against those components. I guess conventional ships aren’t obsolete after all.”

Zaxby said, “Nothing is truly obsolete. It only crops up in another form once the landscape of war changes.”

“So how do we isolate these components?” asked Adler.

Straker banged his fist on the table. “That’s what we need to figure out.”

* * *

Admiral Sandra Hoyt's brows furrowed as she examined her tactical situation in the superdreadnought *Atlantis's* holotank. She'd lost only one ship of thirty-three, so she counted that as a win, considering the heavy attacks she'd fended off defending the gas giant, Celadon-5.

To preserve her mobile fleet, though, she'd sacrificed most of her corvette-sized orbital weapons platforms, and one moon fortress out of twelve. That fortress had been shattered by shipkillers launched from the largest Opter drones. Unlike warships, fortresses were made mostly of rock. Get close enough with a nuclear blast and they cracked.

She'd done so well because the Opters had only sent a quarter of their forces against her fleet, and also because they were trying to minimize collateral damage to the valuable space industry. They wanted to capture as much as possible.

Now, though, everything had changed. She'd received extracts of the Trinity data and assessments from Straker's ship, the *Richthofen*. These Crystals made her guts churn with fear, though she refused to show it.

Only a fool doesn't fear real power, someone had once said. The Crystals had shown enormous power, multiplied by the "alien factor"—what other tricks did they have? Straker's people had made some good guesses about how the Crystals operated, but suggested only one real way to overcome them.

An all-out, combined attack.

Beat the Opters, take our lumps, and with what's left, hit the Crystals from all sides, she thought. They're vulnerable from the rear, it looks like.

But Hoyt remained skeptical. "Are the updated battle sims done?" she asked her senior intelligence officer, a Ruxin called Lieutenant Paxor.

The octopoid shifted its eyes. "Momentarily." Its subtentacle clusters fluttered over the console, though it was also brainlinked via a hardline. "Do you wish a summary, or to view the graphics?"

"The graphics for now.

"Aye aye, ma'am. Initiating."

The SAI simulation program showed the enemy capital ships chasing off the cutter flotilla, which curved away and raced around the perimeter of the battle area to join Hoyt's fleet at C-5. The Ruxin skimmer squadron

performed a similar maneuver, its radius of evasion defined by giving the Crystals a wide berth, well beyond the assumed range of their grav-beam.

Both flotillas easily beat the slower enemy to C-5, and deployed as she'd ordered, awaiting the combined Opter-Crystal fleet. Then, in the sim, her fortresses destroyed one Nest Ship and a few thousand more drones, but were unable to stop the Crystal cruisers.

In fact, as soon as the Crystals got into range of each fortress, it was demolished by grav-beams.

"Pause," Hoyt said. The sim froze. "Those Crystals took some heavy shots by various fortress weapons. How do you know they won't penetrate their shields?"

"I used the Trinity data, which indicates their shields are able to stop any weapon we have."

"What about multiple simultaneous strikes?"

"Those are difficult to achieve," Paxor replied.

"Reprogram the sim to take them into account. All fortresses and warships to combine on one single Crystal as it approaches."

The Ruxin reprogrammed the sim, backed the timeline up, and restarted. This time, her warships supported the fortresses' long-range shots with as many direct-fire weapons as possible, all volleyed to strike together.

Most of her forces' shots missed due to enemy evasion. But fortresses couldn't evade. The first fortress still died. Then another. Then another.

Hoyt growled in her throat, but let the sim run. The Crystals were getting closer, and more fortresses were coming into range as they travelled in orbit. As the distance closed to the midranges, one Crystal cruiser finally died. The bridge crew gave a cheer.

"It's just a sim," Hoyt reminded them, but she was also pleased. The enemy wasn't invincible. Then she noticed her intelligence officer reprogramming the sim on the fly. "What are you doing?"

"Improving the enemy's tactics. We have to assume they're running the same kind of sims and will take measures to avoid losing ships."

Hoyt avoided an audible sigh by taking a deep breath and nodding.

"Right. How long do we have before realtime engagement?"

"Approximately seventy minutes," Paxor said.

"We'll continue running sims and trying out tactics. There must be a way to get an edge. This time, we'll send in the cutters and skimmers on their flanks, try to maneuver behind them."

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

Forty minutes later, Hoyt still hadn’t figured out how to win. In her most optimistic results, the Republic forces inflicted serious casualties, but still lost. The Crystals were just too powerful, especially with the Opters to screen them—and this assumed no more alien tech surprises would make the situation worse.

Hoyt spoke up. “FTL comlink to Admiral Straker, please.”

“FTL comlink on audio established.”

“Straker here, Sandra.”

“Sir, all my sims tell me we’re going to get our clocks cleaned—badly. I’ve got thirty minutes to make a different decision.”

“You want to retreat? Give it all up to the enemy?” Straker’s voice held no accusation.

Yet Hoyt still felt pained. No commander wishes to retreat with a fight unfinished. “We can sabotage all the industry and evacuate most of the personnel.”

“And then what?”

“We either make a stand at Celadon-3, or we flee the system.”

Straker said, “I think we’d be worse off at Celadon-3. We’d have billions of people on the surface to worry about.”

“I disagree, sir. We’ll have a fresh, undamaged suite of orbitals and fortresses. We could get there before the enemy and offload all the evacuees, which we can’t take on a long sidespace journey anyway. On the other hand, if we transfer them to our warships and flee the system, we’ll be so packed with people we can’t fight effectively. Or we leave them here to be captured.”

Paxor spoke up. “We could disembark the evacuees at Celadon-3 and still flee the system with our mobile units. This is the rational course.”

Hoyt nodded. “Much as I hate to say it, that preserves our fleet-in-being. That’s the priority. Defending to the death only makes sense if we can win. I don’t think we can. Admiral Straker?”

Straker paused so long Hoyt was about to ask whether the comlink was still active. “Begin evacuation immediately. Booby-trap everything you can, with nukes if you can spare them. Set all defense SAIs to auto-fight and remote command with FTL datalink. The skimmers and cutters will hit them from the sides to buy you some more time. Get as many people out as

you can and run for C-3. We'll do the same all over again there, and then flee with our mobile forces if we can't win."

A bitter taste filled Hoyt's mouth. "Aye aye, sir."

"Straker out."

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Chapter 6

Celadon System, Crystal Cruiser P1

Forebear Prime of the Shard absorbed information from all external spectra and integrated it using augmenting crystal matrices. These structured calculators, what the water-lovers would call computers, extended Prime's thought-dominance throughout his ship. They allowed him to tap into all other crystals, whether they were sentient or not, and form a single group-mind. This network, connected via segments of the entire range of dimensional forces, in turn controlled his cruiser and the singularity that powered it.

Prime contemplated the inherent superiority of the Shard without prejudice against the water-lovers. He had no need of truth-warping pride. Reality simply was what it was. The new supplanted the old.

And superiority did not imply invulnerability. Every living thing, from the tiniest piezoelectric flake to the most complex Shard, had its flaw, its cleavage, its possible fracture—and its strike potential.

Thus, Prime remained cautious. The enemy was numerous and motivated to defend its territory. The hydrophilic ally, the builder, the insectoid Species called Opter, was necessary to cover Prime's own flaws and to absorb enemy firepower. The wise military Prime did not disdain even the lowest of forces, but employed them cleverly instead.

His sibling Primes, designated P2, P3 and P4, followed his lead. His spectra closely integrated their networks, forming a secondary group-mind. While danger remained, he had confidence the Shard would seize the gas giant and all its rich environs for itself, as agreed with the Opter. The Opter would assist the Shard first, and then the Shard would assist the Opter in acquiring the fetid water world they desired.

And, if all proceeded as planned, significant forces of the enemy would be shattered, simplifying future military actions.

To that end, Forebear Prime sent spectral data to P5, P6, P7 and P8, ordering their tactical deployment. He was relatively certain the enemy had as yet no knowledge of these elements.

That factual void would be their undoing.

* * *

Straker paced with frustration as the *Richthofen* hurried around the edge of the battlefield. The ship was fast for her size, lacking the armor and heavy weaponry of a cruiser in favor of speed and launch ports. Instead of a thick hull, she carried missiles, dropships, and aerospace drones.

Her speed meant the ship would reach C-5 just before the enemy engaged. It might put *Richthofen* into range of the Crystals grav-beams. But if Straker was going to get into the fight, he had to take that risk. Odds were, the Crystals would have much more threatening targets, from their point of view.

So he had to play the odds.

The fight was shaping up as a set-piece battle, the two sides constrained by their objectives. In simple terms, the enemy wanted to capture as much of C-5's orbital heavy industry as possible—hundreds of facilities built on moons ranging from tiny to large. The Republic forces wanted to evacuate and destroy those facilities, and get away without losing too many ships.

Live to fight another day.

In the *Richthofen*'s main holotank Straker watched as Hoyt's fleet deployed every small craft it had. Supplemented by civilian shuttles, tugs and barges, the evacuation ferried thousands of workers and military personnel to the warships even as those warships exchanged extreme-range shots with the incoming enemy.

Sunward from C-5, thirteen in-system freighters were packed full of evacuees. They'd already departed for C-3, the greenest world of the Celadon system. These slow ships, built for capacity and efficiency rather than speed, needed a head start.

At Hoyt's orders, the cutters and skimmers divided into four forces, each waiting at one of four three-dimensional flanks of the enemy. Straker comprehended the positions by calling them top and bottom, left and right, though he knew such designations were meaningless. What mattered was that the four flotillas would curve around the enemy flanks and strike them from four directions, rather than making a stand in front of them.

As Lieutenant Sinden had pointed out, the best defense is often a good offense.

The *Richthofen* passed behind one flotilla and angled in toward C-5 just as the four turned inward to attack. More than 1600 cutters and the remaining skimmers began slicing through 80,000 Opter drones like sharks through tuna.

But these tuna fought back, and cutters inevitably died as well. The skimmers, larger and with the advantage of intermittent underspace capability, fared much better as they arrowed toward the tight ball of Nest Ships that followed the Crystal cruisers.

Straker could see Hoyt's tactic begin to take effect. The skimmers had proven devastating against Nest Ships, and the Opter Queens, no doubt terrified for their precious persons, pulled back and thickened their drone screen even as they crowded closer to the Crystals. Now, the Crystals had to decide where to apply their terrifying grav-beams—at the C-5 defenses, or at skimmers, the threat to their allies.

The core fleet of Nest Ships and Crystals slowed their approach to C-5 as they turned to fight their attackers. The Crystal shields, perversely visible by the very blank spots they created, turned to face the nearest skimmers.

However, with skimmers attacking simultaneously from all directions, the slow Crystal cruisers should be vulnerable. Skimmers only needed to change their headings to make underspace runs at the unshielded sterns of Crystals.

In response, the Crystals tightened up their formation, backing closer and closer to each other, shields facing outward like surrounded foot soldiers.

With a flash of insight, Straker saw clearly what the Crystals would do. "Comms, broadcast to all skimmers: do not make runs on the Crystals! Attack the Nest Ships! That's an order! Transmit and set to repeat!"

"Aye aye, sir."

"Why those orders, sir?" Lieutenant Sinden asked. "We *have* to try to destroy the Crystals. We also need intelligence, whether the skimmers succeed or fail."

"Because, Nancy, they're going to fail. It's those shields."

"But the shields can only stop attacks from one direction."

Straker rubbed his eyes. "I really hope you're right. We'll see."

In the heat of battle, it appeared only half of the skimmers received the message—or perhaps half the Ruxin captains chose to ignore his orders. Fifteen of the thirty-one skimmers aimed themselves at the Crystal formation.

That formation tightened further and further, until it seemed the Crystal cruisers would crash into each other. At the ridiculously close range of less

than one hundred meters separation from their fellows, the four ships suddenly seemed to vanish.

Straker watched in helpless horror as his intuition came true. The Crystals had formed a hedgehog, with shields in all directions—or perhaps they formed one merged uber-shield protecting them all, if that was possible.

Four of the fifteen skimmer captains figured this out as well, or perhaps they finally heeded Straker's orders to divert, but eleven Ruxin ships aimed themselves at the Crystals and dipped into underspace.

Straker winced as massive explosions shook the area around the Crystal cruisers. Those on *Richthofen's* bridge who understood groaned with him. Others cheered, thinking the Crystals had been hit hard. After a few seconds, the debris and radiation cleared.

Eleven skimmers had vanished, utterly annihilated by high-speed impacts with the shields, even in underspace.

The merged Crystal cruisers remained, unharmed.

Of the frantically evading Nest Ships, six survived a smattering of explosions, and one died. It appeared the Opters had adjusted their defenses against skimmers, killing several with point defenses or drone fire.

Of Dexon's forty original skimmers, only twelve now remained. Those curved to join into a squadron and slash outward through one of the drone-cutter battles, proudly continuing the fight. Straker's throat tightened with admiration. The Ruxins made tremendous sacrifices today, and had killed six Nest Ships. In pure material terms, they'd made a good trade.

But Straker didn't feel good.

He felt worse and worse as Crystal grav-beams lashed out and plucked four more skimmers from space, incidentally destroying a cutter and at least twenty Opter drones that got in the way. The weapon simply passed through and ripped apart anything in its path. It appeared nothing could block it.

Straker wondered whether a Crystal shield could block it. Somehow, he had to get his hands on that tech.

"Broadcast to the skimmers: stay out of range of the grav-beams. Rejoin the capital ships." This time, it appeared they received his message, as they continued outward in an arc that would bring them back to the gas planet.

"Comlink to Commodore Dexon," Straker continued.

The comms officer tried several channels, and then listened to her earpiece. She turned toward Straker where he stood. "Sir...Captain Qoxim

reports Commodore Dexon's ship is not among the survivors."

"Shit." Straker shook his head in sorrow, and then took a deep breath. "Another hero falls."

He turned back to the holotank. In it, he saw the cutters still getting the best of the Opter drones. If allowed, they would eventually destroy all the enemy fighters.

But the Crystals weren't going to give them the chance. As the drone swarm collapsed inward around them, the four cruisers began unerringly destroying cutters. The shots were slow, but they took their toll, and the Opters modified their formations and tactics to take advantage of the Crystals' terrifying destructiveness.

Many of the small, tough cutters made runs against the Crystals when the swirl of battle brought them close enough, but without heavy weapons, they inflicted no damage. In fact, the Crystals ignored their threat, except to shoot them down as a man with a shotgun would hunt ducks—without fear or concern.

"Order the cutters to pull out," Straker said when it became clear they were taking unreasonable losses. "Tell them to join with Hoyt for a fighting retreat to C-3."

"Admiral Straker," Captain Smits said, "We're approaching C-5 for rendezvous with Admiral Hoyt. Where do you want us? What should *Richthofen* do?"

Straker imagined he could hear the criticism in Smits' voice—the implication that his ship and crew were at risk to no purpose, outclassed and out of place in a brutal fleet battle. After all, assault carriers had one job—to carry troops to a ground fight.

The comms officer saved him from a possibly embarrassing answer. "Admiral Hoyt for you, sir. Vidlink."

"On the vid."

Hoyt's harried image appeared. "Sir, I've got a problem. The outermost moon of C-5, Billerbeck, is far outside our area of operations. Six hundred miners dragged their feet on self-evacuating, and now the Opter drones are about to land on their rock. They're screaming for help. I can't spare anyone, but you're close."

"Say no more," Straker said. "We'll get them out."

"I can give you supporting fire from two frigates and *Atlantis*. Do you want me to order the cutters to cover you?"

“You’re the fleet officer, Sandra. You decide. Just keep them off us. Straker out.” Straker turned to Smits. “There’s your answer, Janos. Get to it.

“Aye aye, sir.” Smits began snapping orders.

“We’ll suit up.” Straker jerked his head at Major Adler and Loco, but they were already heading toward the door.

“Make way!” Loco bellowed ahead of Straker and Adler. Spacers moved aside as the mechsuiters pounded down the passageways to the enormous dropship deck. When they got there, they vaulted straight into their war machines and linked in. All around them, mechsuiters and battlesuiters did the same.

Seven Marksman dropships opened their front entry doors, allowing four Regimental mechsuits to load each. The mechsuits actually stood on the drop doors, like old-fashioned aerial bomb bays, while the SAIs locked them into place, readying for transport.

The eighth Marksman wasn’t Regimental—it was the Breakers’, and only held Straker, Loco and Redwolf. The fourth slot might have been Karst’s—he’d trained on the prototype Sledgehammer, after all—if the man hadn’t betrayed them.

Straker still wondered why he’d done that. Karst had stubbornly refused to talk, and remained in solitary confinement. Was he a humanopt, playing his own game? The bio-test was inconclusive.

The rest of the Breakers were ready to deploy. Some crewed vacuum-capable armored vehicles, and some were outfitted as battlesuit infantry. All had the latest and best equipment, and all were loaded into modern high-capacity assault landers originally developed for Hundred Worlds marines. Now, their gear matched their skills and toughness, the best of the best.

Straker keyed the general ground channel. “Listen up, Breakers and First Regiment! This is a rescue under fire. We got six hundred miners on a moon called Billerbeck. Our goal is to evac them to the *Richthofen*. We’re already on course and are planning on the fly. This is the real deal, boys and girls. Let’s bring everybody home. Straker out.”

He reset the comlink to keep key personnel standing by for instructions, and then connected to Sinden. “Lieutenant, I need HUD packages and updates on Billerbeck for all assault elements—layouts, automated defenses, IFF codes, the works—and I need them yesterday.”

“Pushing data now, *Liberator*.” That last word seemed a bit sarcastic, even as Straker’s HUD blinked with an update.

“You have something to say, Lieutenant Sinden?”

“Only that if you’re as important to the Republic as you think you are, you shouldn’t be leading this mission in person. Admirals don’t pilot mechsuits.”

“This admiral does. Subject closed. Now, what do I need to know about that moon?”

“Owned by Carstairs Corporation. Standard rare metals extraction. Mature mine, long rotation, and the miners own shares. That’s why they didn’t want to blow it and evac.”

“Understandable,” Straker said.

“Their greed may get some of you killed.”

“Some of *us*, Nancy. *Richthofen*’s in the combat zone too. Straker out.” He examined the briefing package. It was impressively complete, for a short-notice job. Sinden really was a superb analyst. She and her team must have been building files on Celadon’s facilities for days, ever since she knew *Richthofen* was heading here.

Straker used the files to brief his key personnel, detailing drop and landing zones, critical infrastructure to destroy, defensive fires and assembly areas, everything ground troops needed to perform a mission. Only then did he brainlink into *Richthofen*’s holotank and sensor displays to “see” out into space.

The leading edge of the Opter drone swarm was reaching in a tendrill of hundreds toward Billerbeck. Behind them came thousands more, elongating like an organic pseudopod rather than like a military unit. Speeding to intervene came a flotilla of cutters 160 strong, sweeping like a knife blade to cut off the enemy from Billerbeck.

At the same time, two frigates and *Atlantis* peppered the drones with fire optimized against small craft. Those three ships must be already full of evacuees, for all of Hoyt’s other vessels were still taking personnel aboard.

“Stand by for rapid deployment sequence,” the sexless voice of the SAI in charge of the flight deck said. “Deployment in ten, nine, eight...”

When the countdown hit zero, Straker felt the jolts and G forces that told him the Marksman had launched into space, but for now his point of view remained outside, looking at the space battle. It was a privilege of command not to have to feel confined to a tin can before being dropped to the surface.

Richthofen wasn't in optimal position to drop onto the mining facility, and it didn't take Straker long to see why. Smits was keeping the moon between his ship and the Crystals. If anything could stop a grav-beam, it would be a few trillion tons of metal-heavy planetoid.

That meant the drop package would have to fly partly around the moon, drop, evac, and then make it back. Straker cursed the Crystals once more even as his dropship and landers skimmed low over the moon's rocky surface.

Above his force flew FTL-controlled aerospace drones from *Richthofen*, providing top cover. These exchanged fire with Opters already, keeping them busy. One melted and crumpled from a lucky laser hit. There was no way to see what effect they were having on the enemy.

"Stand by for ultra-low drop," the voice of the Marksman pilot said. "Three-second max, thirty meters." The bay doors beneath Straker's feet opened, leaving his mechsuit hanging from the drop struts.

Straker pulled the pilot's name off his HUD. "Thanks, Ensign Conners. Good hunting."

"You too, gents. Dropping in three... two... one..."

The struts shoved three mechsuits down and clear of the Marksman as the locking clamps released. Straker immediately prepped for landing, flexing his knees and letting his SAI stabilize him during the short fall in low gravity.

His Jackhammer hit the ground running and he immediately bounded for the central mine shaft opening, staying low. Loco followed, and Redwolf brought up the rear in his Sledgehammer. All around them, landers set down and spewed vehicles and troops. These immediately formed an inner perimeter. Farther out, Major Adler's mechsuiters took positions by squad.

Straker scanned for the miners' comms and quickly found them. "Billerbeck miners, this is Admiral Straker. Come in."

"Straker? Liberator Straker?"

"The one and only. Who's this?"

"Foreman Auburn, um, Your Honor."

"Just Straker will do, Auburn. You ready to get off this rock?"

"Yes, sir. We're suited up and at the central shaft, like we were told. Well, most of us."

Straker's neck prickled. "What do you mean, 'most of us'?"

“I got a dozen holdouts in the deep shaft. Say they’re staying.”

Straker’s mind raced. “You did set the destruct charges, right?”

“Well, sir...”

“Great fucking Cosmos, Auburn! Are you telling me you’ve got traitors who want to give this facility over to the enemy?”

“No, sir. They just don’t want to lose all their investment.”

“Idiots,” Loco said in Straker’s ear. “Fuck them. If they die, they die.”

“Even if I agreed,” Straker replied privately to Loco, “the charges would have to be set.”

“No need to get fancy. *Richthofen* can lay a shipkiller on the mine after we’ve gone.”

“Good point. But I don’t want to leave those holdouts.” Straker switched back to the miner channel. “Auburn, listen up. You go get those holdouts and drag them with you if you have to knock them out to do it. Don’t worry about the charges. We’ll nuke this place after we’re gone.”

“They’ve barricaded themselves, and they have lasers. I ain’t gonna lose good men trying to convince them.”

“They’d fire on their own friends?”

“They got everything they own tied up in this place, Liberator sir,” Auburn said in an agonized voice. “They’ll be ruined.”

“They’ll be dead is what they’ll be, Auburn. Tell them I’ll personally guarantee every miner’s share, in hard credit. You can all buy into another mine—but you have to live to do it! Otherwise, they stay and get nuked from above. No shit, I’ll do it, with or without them in it. In the meantime, get the rest loaded.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll convince them. Either way, it’s not your worry anymore, sir. It’s mine. Auburn out.”

“Shit never goes as planned,” Loco said. “Idiot civilians.”

The Regimental channel flashed, and Adler’s voice spoke. “Contact east, armor advancing. All squads engage.”

Straker brought up his fused tactical picture, synthesized from multiple inputs in the network, and his mouth ran dry. The Opters had made their own landing, beyond the horizon and out of arc of Republic support fire. Over one thousand ground vehicles were advancing on the mining complex from the east.

Chapter 7

Mining complex, surface of the moon Billerbeck

Straker resisted the urge to charge toward the Opter ground force attack on the mining complex. Sinden had been right, in her way. His place wasn't at the tip of the spear anymore. He was the overall commander, and couldn't command if he was fully immersed in combat.

That didn't mean he wasn't involved. His mechsuit's LADA began tracking and targeting incoming missiles with blinding lasers, sending them off course with burned-out sensors. Dozens of other arrays mounted on the Breakers' armored vehicles did the same as an integrated network. Unguided strikes plowed up moon-soil and rock all around, turning the area into a dusty soup.

Fortunately, there was no air to suspend the dust, which cleared quickly. Unfortunately, the strikes kept coming. The warheads were small, designed only to kill what they hit, but there were enough of them that the Breakers lost scattered vehicles and battlesuiters.

Straker ranged his virtual point of view out in all directions, far enough to confirm that the Opters were only attacking from one direction. They'd landed in safety several kilometers off, beyond the moon's close horizon, and then attacked. Farther to the east, the cutters and the Opter drones met in near-moon space, battling viciously for dominance above the terrain.

"Breakers, formation change. Face east and back up the Regiment, with flanks refused. Pretty sure we have no threats from the other cardinal directions. Take hull-down positions and watch each other's asses. Breaker mechsuits will remain on overwatch reserve and nail any leakers."

The Breakers quickly reformed by platoons, facing east toward the enemy. Blinded missiles and dumb railgun rounds fell among them like artillery, but Straker's troops stood fast.

After disgorging the armor, Breaker landers had repositioned near the central mine shaft. A multiple-airlock crysteel dome capped the entrance, its doors now wide open to vacuum. Lines of suited miners scrambled into the blocky craft. As each filled to bursting with more than fifty workers, it sealed and lifted, flying nap-of-the-surface to the west, toward the *Richthofen*.

A warhead fell among the grounded landers, blowing miners in all directions. Battlesuited Breakers checked the fallen and hustled survivors into the landers, carrying and tossing many of them bodily in the low gravity.

A lander tipped on its side with the impact of a railgun round. The kinetic penetrator ricocheted into the sky, but the vehicle armor held. Battlesuiters rushed to manhandle the lander upright.

The fall of warheads diminished as the battles in space and on the ground expanded. Straker observed closely as the twenty-eight mechsuits of the Regiment tore into the ranks of the Opters. The enemy had nothing like the old Hok heavy tanks, so every force-cannon shot was a kill. The new Jackhammers proved especially effective, allowing two shots for every one a Foehammer could fire.

Straker watched with an envy he felt in his bones as Major Adler raced, dodged and whirled among the enemy. Supported by his platoon, he slaughtered the Oper machines and their insectoid crews as fast as he could engage them.

He's almost as good as I am, Straker thought. Or as good as I used to be. Have I lost my combat edge?

At the center, farther back among the Breakers, the Regiment's platoon of Sledgehammers strode like fearsome metal gods, dealing out death at long range. While less mobile than the smaller mechsuits, they made up for it in firepower. Each carried a railgun and a particle beam in place of gauntlets, gatlings or force-cannon. They were designed for direct support of the Jackhammers and Foehammers, and as long as they maintained their distance from the enemy, they functioned as near-invincible snipers.

Straker's HUD beeped an alert sent by the *Richthofen*. A squadron of Oper heavy fighters, the ones piloted by the warrior wasps, had broken off from the furball above and now swooped toward the battlefield like dive-bombers.

Overriding the Sledgehammers' comlinks and adding in the Breakers channel, Straker gave his orders. "Incoming, aerospace, squadron strength, azimuth ninety-five mark sixty."

The SAI network understood his words and cued targeting for every vehicle with an appropriate weapon. It prioritized the dedicated LADAs and highlighted the greatest threats, prompting gunners to shoot at the attackers

on their runs. *Richthofen's* covering aerospace drones were already firing independently.

As one, barrels, missiles and waveguides lifted to the sky. Straker raised his force-cannons and set them for maximum range. That distance was far too short by space standards, so he switched to gatlings and fired bursts. The penetrators would fly farther than cannon plasma, though they were too small to do more than annoy the enemy heavies. Beside him, Loco did the same, while Redwolf hammered away with his longer-ranged weapons.

The Regimental Sledgehammers launched heavy attacks, each the equivalent of an aerospace fighter's weaponry. Their pilots, the brainlinked elites of the former Hundred Worlds, feet planted on steady ground and with unimpeded shots, immediately brought down four of the attackers, and then four more.

In response, the wasps loosed a storm of ordnance, supporting their ground troops and aiming at the Breakers and the Regimental mechsuits. Their weapons were naturally longer-ranged than most ground troops, and deadly.

Fortunately, the heavy LADA presence made most of the guided weapons miss, and ground force evasion preserved them from the falling railgun kinetics.

Enemy beam shots, however, were unavoidable, trashing sixteen Breaker armored vehicles and one Regimental Sledgehammer. The Breaker tanks and two-man crews were total losses, not designed to take such a pounding from above. The Sledgehammer pilot managed to eject from his rear mounting port, and a pair of Breaker battlesuiters escorted him toward the landers.

More than forty Breakers dead already, Straker thought. So much for a quick, cheap evac. His sympathy for pigheaded civilians was diminishing by the minute.

But that was the Opters' last, best attack, as the Republic cutters gained temporary aerospace superiority above the complex. Straker, seeing the enemy ground assault stalling, gave his orders. "Breakers, general advance. Watch your frat, but move up and take your shots. The quicker we put these assholes out of our misery, the better."

Straker waved Loco and Redwolf forward. Loco whooped and raced to engage, firing enthusiastically with speedy precision, slipping incoming fire, dodging and weaving. Redwolf didn't go far, but stayed among the

Breakers armor, picking his long-range shots. Straker approved. The man knew his limitations. Though Redwolf piloted a mechsuit, he was not a true mechsuirer.

The Breakers' counterattack turned the tide. Five minutes later, with more than six hundred shattered vehicles littering the battlefield and success clearly impossible, the Opters withdrew. Straker would have said they fled, except they kept their weapons firing toward the Republic forces and maintained their discipline like insectoid machines.

With the aerospace drones and Marksman dropships harrying the enemy over the horizon, Straker called his troops back for extraction.

"Admiral Straker, come in," Lieutenant Sinden's voice spoke from the comlink.

"Straker here."

"The Oter space forces are pushing hard. My projections show insufficient lift to get everything out before they overwhelm your top cover. Strongly advise crews abandon vehicles."

"If they do?"

"You'll make it."

"What about the mechsuits?"

"Iffy. It would be safer to abandon them too."

"Not if I can help it. Burn aerospace drones and missiles to buy us time if you have to."

"Are you sure you're not letting your emotions get the best of you... sir?"

"Mechsuits are more expensive than attack ships, Lieutenant. We need every one."

"Not as expensive as their pilots, Admiral."

"Point taken. Pass my instructions to Smits and the crew. Straker out."

Loco spoke as he came trotting back. "I'm with Sin-bitch on this one. We can always get more suits. Can't make another Loco."

"Yeah, they broke the mold with you, Loco. Take Heiser and get the Breakers organized for pickup. Wounded and vehicle crews first, anybody not in battle armor. Then battlesuiters, then Regimental mechsuits. We three will be last, with or without our suits."

"Roger that, boss." Loco bounded away to supervise the evac.

Straker comlinked Major Adler. "Straker here. Fine job, Andreas. Superb work. Fall back and cover the evac. You're last out, except for me

and my mechsuiters. If we're short of lift, be ready to ditch some Foehammers and save the pilots."

"Roger that, sir. I'll call our Marksmen in."

"Right." Straker switched channels, a bit pained that he'd actually forgotten about the Marksmen dropships, and was only thinking in terms of landers for evac. He checked the orders queue and confirmed Loco had already called for their pickup—last out, as Straker had ordered.

The Marksmen had picked up twenty-four of the twenty-seven Regimental mechsuits when Straker's comlink crackled to life with Zaxby's voice on override. "Derek Straker, the Crystals are coming into range. I suggest you—"

Suddenly, the ground around Straker erupted, his mechsuit screamed with alarms, and his HUD went dark.

* * *

Zaxby unplugged from the backup console he occupied on *Richthofen's* bridge and smoothly switched to ultra-wideband wireless linking via his cyber-aug. The data throughput and reliability was lower, but it allowed him to move rapidly toward his skimmer, docked at one of the *Richthofen's* belly ports.

"Lieutenant, where are you—" he heard Captain Smits' voice call, but ignored it. Instead, Zaxby instructed the ship's SAI to prep his skimmer for launch. Only then did he compose a brief message to Smits informing the captain of his intentions, and set it to deliver after departure. That way, he could plausibly ignore any countermanding orders or other monkey-screechings from the humans.

Those humans themselves had an apropos saying: "Better to ask forgiveness than permission."

The Crystals' direct attack on the Billerbeck mining facility had surprised him, and suggested a certain divergence of intention between Crystals and Opters. After all, the Opters had lost hundreds of vehicles and troops in their attempt to secure the base and workers intact. A grav-beam strike on that same facility seemed to make no sense, especially as the defenders were pulling out.

Maybe the Crystals intuited that the base would be booby-trapped and sabotaged anyway.

Zaxby reminded himself that overestimating enemies was sometimes as bad as underestimating them. All beings were fallible and made mistakes, even Ruxins on rare occasions. Perhaps it was simple military friction and mis-coordination between allies. Perhaps it was a difference in approaches to war.

Or perhaps it represented a disagreement that could be exploited? Only time would tell.

In the meantime, there were humans to be saved by his extraordinary Ruxin prowess... again. Zaxby indulged in a private eyeroll, finding the gesture both appropriate and satisfying.

When he arrived at his skimmer, Zaxby brainlinked and launched without strapping in. There was no time to be wasted. His SAI boosted the small, sleek ship away from the assault carrier and toward Billerbeck even as he slipped into his eight-armed battlesuit. Now that he was male, it was doubly important that he survive—to continue to procreate and pass on his superior genes. He'd already impregnated Premier Freenix in exchange for her rejuvenation. Fifty-three of his offspring had survived their infancy, which was a good start.

By the time Zaxby hardlinked in at his pilot's station, the skimmer was halfway to the moon, still behind its shielding bulk. He swung just wide enough to take a sensor snapshot of the battlefield before dodging behind the planetoid again.

Thus shielded, he aimed his skimmer directly at the surface while he calculated and input a precise course. Its parameters must be fine indeed for the maneuver he planned.

The skimmer lined up on the heading and he triple-checked its alignment. Then he crossed his subtentacles for luck—a habit picked up from humans, of course—and dove into underspace.

Only seconds later, his point of congruency passed through Billerbeck and stopped just above the surface of the mining facility—and the recent battlefield. The skimmer emerged and hovered briefly over the shattered landscape. Zaxby updated his virtual-HUD information and immediately plunged back into underspace.

The new, close-range data allowed him to locate two active mechsuit signatures. He fitted his subtentacles into specialized teleoperation gloves—what the humans called waldos—and extended the corresponding external duralloy tentacles from their sockets on the skimmer's forward hull. These

represented one of many modifications to Zaxby's personal vessel. Now the small, ovoid ship looked even more like a sea creature.

Thus prepared, Zaxby slid the skimper to a point above the first mechsuit and emerged. He immediately scooped up the suit and thrust it into his open cargo bay, and moved on to the next. Within scant seconds he'd also shoved the second mechsuit into the cramped space, and immediately dove into underspace again. He set a direct course through the moon and into open space.

"Straker to ship," came a voice. "Identify yourself."

"Fortunately, I am extremely secure in my masculine identity, Derek Straker," Zaxby replied. "Also fortunately, I have decided to save your lives once again."

"Lives? You got Loco and Redwolf?"

"I have General Paloco, but unfortunately Master Sergeant Redwolf is dead."

Straker bared his teeth. "You're sure?"

"I'm synching to your suit and passing you the data now."

Zaxby shared the imagery he'd acquired and highlighted certain elements as he spoke. "This is what's left of Master Sergeant Redwolf's Sledgehammer. As you can clearly see, it has been severely disrupted by the grav-beam."

"It's been turned inside-out, you mean... along with Redwolf."

"An apt description."

"You're sure he didn't punch out?"

"Organic residues indicate he did not."

Straker sighed audibly, a long hissing expulsion of breath. "Well, fuck."

"Indeed. Do you feel it was worth it?"

"Worth what?"

"Trading his life and thirty-four others for the miners?"

"I'm not in the mood for your shit right now, Zaxby."

"When will you be in the mood, Derek Straker?"

The comlink clicked off.

* * *

Straker resisted the urge to punch something, given he still occupied a sixty-ton mechsuit inside the cargo bay of a rather fragile skimper. He

froze his suit, just in case, and ignored Zaxby's comlink attempts. Instead, he buzzed Loco.

"Here, Derek."

"You heard about Redwolf?"

"I heard. That sucks, and Zaxby doesn't give a crap. I oughta rip off one of his tentacles."

"We lost heavy this battle. Trinity, Nolan, Redwolf...a bunch of other good people. Did I screw up?"

Loco was silent.

"You're not reassuring me, Loco."

Loco's voice seemed resigned, devoid of his usual banter. "Is that what you want? Me to tell you the great Derek Straker never makes a mistake?"

"Was this a mistake?"

Loco paused again. "Yeah, Derek. I think maybe it was. Not because we're getting our asses kicked here. That shit happens. Hell, we got our asses kicked at Corinth but good. But because we shouldn't be here at all."

"I go where the fight is, Loco."

"Don't deflect me. You know what I mean. Not us. The Regiment. The Breakers. You want to go flitting around the galaxy and supervise every battle, fine by me. Hell, I'll be happy to come along and sit on the bridge of a nice, safe superdreadnought. But this wasn't the place and time to stick our dicks into a meat grinder."

"I wanted to save those miners."

"You wanted an excuse to play with your new toys, Derek. I did too. And it was fuckin-A glorious to rip the shit out of some aliens again. But this is the price of command. You sent my guys into combat and some of them died. I can accept that. Shit happens. But if you want to pick it apart, then yeah. I think you screwed up."

"Your guys?"

"My guys, yeah. They might be named Straker's Breakers, but I've been the one commanding them for the past year. I know all the names of the ones who died. Do you?"

Straker had no answer. He broke the connection.

After a while he grew chilly in underspace. He opened a new channel and contacted Zaxby. "What's taking so long?" he demanded.

"We aren't heading for the *Richthofen*."

"Why not?"

“Because I know you, Derek Straker, and I know humans. If you return to the *Richthofen* right now, the Breakers and the Regiment may become infected with your doubt. Better that they think you’re lost for a certain short time. They will begin the grieving process, the first stage of which is denial. When they receive a message from me that you are alive, their denial will seem justified and their morale will soar.”

Straker mused on that. It seemed to make sense, but it also smacked of Zaxby-style manipulation and self-justification. “So where are we headed?”

“For flatspace. This system has become far too dangerous.”

“No. Set course for Admiral Hoyt’s flagship.”

“Even a superdreadnought is not proof against the Crystals’ gravity weapons. I strongly suggest you issue an order for all forces to withdraw until such time as we have developed defenses against them.”

“Oh, come on, Zaxby. The Crystal weapons aren’t magic.”

“A wise human once said that a sufficiently advanced technology would seem like magic. At this point, all I have are theories, and thin ones at that. You know what a technological advantage can do in a battle. Mechsuits are prime examples. This time, enemy aliens have the ‘magic’ high-tech and we are the low-tech cannon fodder. Hurling our forces against them is pointless, foolish and wasteful. You’re concerned about a few Breakers lost? How many thousands of highly trained Republic spacers will you throw away trying to prove otherwise? How many ships?”

Straker growled in frustration. Zaxby was right. Dammit, he was usually right, and it was galling. But following Zaxby’s advice would leave Celadon in enemy hands. This was the one battle the Republic was sure to win, even if they lost thirty-five other systems. The battle where they bloodied the Opters’ noses.

It was supposed to be a battle to prove the new skimmers, and the cutter concept—and it had. Without the Crystals, the Opters would have been annihilated in a perfect trap. This one stunning victory would have sustained morale and proven the way for Straker’s forces to reverse the tide, punish the Opters and drive them back to their territory in defeat.

No way, Straker thought. It wasn’t over yet. If he could pull this one out, if he could prove that the Crystals were not gods, not magic, and were vulnerable to smart, hard fighting, it would go a long way. Besides, the people of Celadon deserved a stubborn defense, not a pullout after only half a battle.

“Zaxby, head for the *Atlantis*. That’s an order.”

“Aye aye, Admiral.” The chill of underspace abruptly disappeared.

“What, no arguments?”

Zaxby brightened. “Actually, I have many more. Do you wish to hear them?”

“No.”

“Very well. I have much to do. Zaxby out.”

Straker let it go. Zaxby was following orders. That’s what mattered.

He accessed the *Darter*’s sensor feed and confirmed they’d made a wide turn toward Celadon-3, the populated green planet. They were now on a parallel course to Hoyt’s *Atlantis* and the rest of her fleet, which was withdrawing inward and fighting a conservative rearguard action, staying just outside of the pursuing Crystals’ grav-beam range. The remainder of the cutters had joined them too.

Ahead of them, a gaggle of civilian ships boosted for Celadon-3. Straker wondered if it wouldn’t be better to send them onward to flatspace, but discarded that idea. Evacuating some civilians and leaving others to their fate would be the wrong move. It would be bad enough if and when he had to retreat to preserve the fleet.

So it appeared Zaxby was interpreting his orders liberally, aiming for a rendezvous at the planet rather than racing immediately for *Atlantis*. Straker decided against pushing the issue. A few extra hours in his mechsuit wouldn’t hurt him. He could use the sleep anyway.

Straker awoke to a persistent alarm and the sensation of light stim in his bloodstream. He checked his systems and found the suit had given it to him—without orders.

“Zaxby, did you hack my suit and stim me?”

“Just enough to ensure you’re clearheaded for some bad news.”

Straker closed his eyes for a moment and felt his heart thump in his chest. Zaxby wouldn’t do this without a good reason.

“All right. Let me have it.

Chapter 8

Celadon System, Assault Carrier *Richthofen*

Straker scrambled his mechsuit's personalized security sequence yet again, but shrugged to himself. Zaxby probably had a back door into every software system he'd ever had contact with. Hacking into his suit systems and administering a stim was barely an insult. Straker was, after all, in the belly of Zaxby's ship. "What bad news do you have?"

Instead of telling him verbally, Zaxby pushed images to Straker's HUD. "I have detected four more Crystal cruisers lying in wait dead ahead of Admiral Hoyt's fleet. Of course, I immediately passed this information to her. Against my advice, she has deployed to attack."

Straker spun his virtual viewpoint in on the impending battle. Helpful graphical aids allowed even a ground-pounder to discern that the Republic capital ships couldn't turn aside in time. They'd been accelerating toward Celadon-3 to stay ahead of the pursuing enemy fleet. Maximum evasion would still put them well within the Crystals' range.

The enemy had cleverly trapped Hoyt, using their stealth to set an ambush.

Clearly, Hoyt had decided to fight her way through. Since she couldn't run, she might as well attack as effectively as possible, do as much damage as she could. She might even snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. At worst, the action would add to the Republic's meager data about the Crystals.

"Zaxby... did you know there was an ambush? Is that why you didn't head straight for Atlantis?"

"No, Derek Straker, I didn't know. However, I did not see any advantage to be gained in joining the fleet. Better to remain well away from any potential battle area for as long as possible. I suggested this to Captain Smits as well, which is why you see the *Richthofen* is also far off to the side, out of the battle zone."

"In this case you were right," Straker said grudgingly.

"Naturally."

"The Crystals let the civilian transports go by."

"So it seems—the better to remain hidden until the last minute."

Straker examined Hoyt's deployment. She'd set up her capital ships in a deep, narrow cone, open end toward the enemy and her flagship at the rear apex. This was a standard formation that maximized forward firepower, eliminated fratricide problems, and allowed the lighter forward elements to screen and skirmish while the heavier ships applied their fire as needed.

She'd split up her cutter force into six flotillas this time, each spreading wide and looping in from the sides. These had no defense against the enemy grav-beams except for sheer numbers and separation between elements. Some would die, but like skirmishing infantry, most would survive.

The twelve remaining Ruxin skimmers formed another squadron. These also sped on a long flanking maneuver, using their superior speed to come in from the rear.

"The Crystals are just going to hedgehog up again," Straker said.

"That will serve Admiral Hoyt's purposes," Zaxby said. "They cannot fire in that position, and without return fire, she will be able to concentrate all her weaponry without distraction. Her strategy is to suppress them and speed past, doing what damage she can."

Straker understood. "She's treating them like immobile fortresses rather than ships. They're so slow, it might work."

"I suspect not."

"What? What aren't you telling me, Zaxby?"

"Many things, Derek. In this case, I only deduce that the Crystals, in possession of excellent intelligence about the Republic, would not take up such a position if they did not expect to win. Ergo, they have more surprises for us."

Straker sighed. "I hate you, Zaxby."

"The inferior always either loves or hates the superior. I don't blame you."

"You're in touch with the fleet?"

"I have passed them my analyses. However, I don't see Admiral Hoyt has much choice. The enemy has placed her in a difficult position."

Straker resisted the urge to pound something, as he was still in his mechsuit. "What the hell can we do?"

"We and *Richthofen* should stay out of it and gather data. Also, I suggest we get between the Crystals and Celadon-3. This may discomfit them slightly, and also we shall be in a position to retrieve any survival pods or lifeboats which continue ballistically past the battlespace. This will also

allow you and Loco to board the *Richthofen*, which will get 120 tons of mechsuit off the *Darter*. You two are making this ship wallow like a gravid cetacean.”

“Fair enough.”

Straker watched as the Republic fleet, still accelerating, began firing salvos of heavy railgun projectiles, coordinated with waves of shipkiller missiles. The salvos should keep the enemy busy and limit their ability to thin out the missile strike.

That was the obvious goal, but the Crystals didn’t cooperate. Instead, they stood firmly in front of the speeding duralloy bullets and took them straight in the face.

The area bloomed with impacts, releasing massive amounts of energy. When the first salvo cleared, the four crystals remained stolidly in place, all four close together.

“Looks like they’re combining their shields,” Straker said.

“You are correct,” Zaxby replied. “They evidently can merge their shields to make them stronger. This makes evasion unnecessary.”

“Any evidence of penetration?”

“None.”

Hoyt evidently saw this too but continued to bombard the enemy as the missile wave came closer. Straker guessed she didn’t know what else to do, and she was probably hoping to force the enemy to expend energy in their own defense.

The next range marker added beam salvos to the railguns. Hoyt timed them to impact just after the railguns—after all, if they arrived first, they’d be striking the Republic’s own bullets from the rear. The missiles were still accelerating, guided slightly off centerline by their controllers.

The doubled impacts seemed to have no additional effect, other than even more spectacular bursts of energy deflecting off the shields.

The cutters turned inward after another three salvos. As they came into range of the Crystals, they began coming apart under grav-beam fire, but only one at a time. It was nerve-racking to know that each hit would kill one ship, but the ships were small and numerous. Many would arrive unscathed.

The twelve Ruxin skimmers, as ordered, followed behind.

This presented a clear dilemma for the Crystals: allow hundreds of cutters and a dozen skimmers to get in behind their shields—or form their

shield-hedgehog and, hopefully, give up the ability to fire at all.

“I presume,” Straker said, “that Hoyt is hoping the enemy’s shield will be weaker if it’s formed into a complete sphere.”

“No doubt,” Zaxby said. “But I believe she’s wrong.”

“Why?”

“Because all other factors being equal, any such field’s strength is a function of its surface area rather than its shape. If the Crystals are able to bring their ships close to one another, even to dock, they can reduce the field to a minimum and strengthen it enormously.”

“Like an underspace congruency point—which has a tiny cross-section and so only allows a little bit of bleed-over.”

“That is an unusually insightful observation.”

“I have my moments. So you think Hoyt won’t kill any Crystals... but will she get her fleet past safely?”

“I believe there is a high probability—barring some other surprise.”

Salvoes continued to smash against the four Crystals, which pulled in tighter and tighter, just as expected. Common operating picture data passed from the cutters and skimmers allowed Straker to see the enemy from every angle, and so he noted when they formed a compact ball, nearly disappearing from detection.

At that moment, the missile salvo struck with microsecond timing. Over one hundred shipkiller fusion missiles exploded, supplemented by two antimatter warheads that actually contacted the Crystal shield. If anything could deliver a knockout punch, it was this concentration of energy.

When the dust cleared, the Crystal shield seemed unaffected.

“Shit...” Straker said.

“Apropos,” Zaxby said. “Yet the results are as I expected.”

The Republic fleet now entered the range of the barely seen Crystal cruisers, still pounding away with direct-fire weaponry. Hoyt also launched small salvoes of missiles, presumably to keep the enemy busy and hedgehogged. Unfortunately, this situation left the cutters and skimmers with nothing to do, other than cruise in lazy arcs, waiting for some development.

Suddenly, a tiny, brief opening in the shield appeared. A grav-beam lanced out and ripped apart the nearest Republic ship—a frigate in the skirmish ring. The shield then closed immediately.

In response, Hoyt upped the rate of fire, keeping the enemy hedgehog under continuous bombardment in an obvious attempt to stop the Crystals from trying that again. This continued until the leading edge of the Republic cone of battle came into short range. In fact, the Crystals would pass right down the throat of the cone, though technically it was the cone that was moving.

As the two formations intersected Straker saw the skirmish line vanish. Eight frigates exploded as one in a ring, and then in sequence six destroyers, four light cruisers and four cruisers, so fast he couldn't even see what was happening.

Aghast, Straker cried out, and heard Loco do the same over the comlink. "Zaxby, what the hell—?"

His exclamation hadn't even finished when the line of explosions seemed to crawl up the cone and swallow the remaining ships—all dreadnoughts. The superdreadnought *Atlantis*, pride of the Fleet, was last, but it didn't matter. It, too, seemed to smash head-on into a wall and shatter like a champagne flute on a concrete floor.

"What—? What—?" Loco's voice echoed over the comlink.

In response, Zaxby pushed a new recording to Straker's HUD, an ultra-slow-motion sensor record from mere seconds ago. "They expanded the shield to become a disc more than one hundred kilometers wide. The cone of battle was only forty kilometers wide. All of Admiral Hoyt's ships collided with it."

"That's... that's..." Straker sputtered.

"Impossible, yes," Zaxby replied. "Yet evidently not. I must surmise that the Crystals somehow anchored the combined shield to one or more of their singularities and hardened it kinetically. The ships might as well have crashed into a planet. This is only a hypothesis, but it fits the facts. I have no more underlying theory regarding how it was achieved."

Straker's mind whirled, trying to take in the disaster. What's more, if Zaxby hadn't been the coward he was, and if Smits hadn't been prudently unwilling to join the fleet, the *Richthofen* and the *Darter* would be space dust as well—along with the Breakers, the Regiment—and Loco and Straker. "Zaxby, I owe you one."

"By my count, you owe me a net nine—but who's counting?"

"How can you joke at a time like this?" Loco demanded.

“What irony, coming from you,” Zaxby said. “And what better time to joke than in the face of grim death?”

Straker held himself back from vomiting. The rolls of the fallen kept lengthening, and he couldn't help feeling it was all his fault. Yet, what could he have done? He made the best plan he could. He'd merely run into a highly unexpected, deadly enemy, who'd out-thought and outfought him at every turn.

That's what he told himself.

Would Carla have done better? He wondered. Maybe so.

But if she'd been in tactical command, she'd be dead instead of Hoyt.

So, there were worse disasters than the one he faced right now.

Taking a deep breath, he clamped down on his nausea and forced all emotion aside. “Send a message... Straker to all remaining sidespace-capable Republic warships: initiate rescue operations, if any. Do not engage the Crystals under any circumstances. Once rescue operations are completed, you are to depart the Celadon system immediately and regroup at...” Straker checked his star map. “...at the Gannon system. We just got our asses kicked, but this was only one battle. The war's far from over, and next time, we'll hurt them bad. Straker out.”

“Message sent,” Zaxby said. “However, I have more bad news.”

“Holy Creator. Oh, go ahead.”

“There is no need for rescue operations. There are no survivors of Admiral Hoyt's fleet.”

“None?”

“None. No living thing could survive that impact, and I detect no pods or lifeboat beacons.”

Straker swallowed. “Get me Smits.”

“Comlink established.”

“Janos?”

“Yes, Liberator?” came Captain Smits' shaken voice.

“Coordinate with Zaxby. We're docking and then you're flying us the fuck out of here.”

“What about the civilians? The world of Celadon-3?”

“They'll be captured, and C-3 occupied. We can't do anything for them now. Someday we'll liberate them again.”

“Yes, sir.” Oddly, Smits did not seem bitter.

“Straker out.” Straker cleared his throat. “Zaxby, message for Celadon-3. Audio only.”

“Recording.”

Straker started to speak several times, but found himself unable. How do you tell five billion people that within hours, they’d be occupied and enslaved by aliens, no doubt forced to work against their own species? He tried to recall something similar from Old Earth history, and his mind lodged on Balian of Ibelin, the European knight who’d been forced to hand over Jerusalem to the Kurdish general Saladin.

Or perhaps better, General Douglas Macarthur, facing the loss of the Philippines and ordered out by his President, escaping to Australia and making a speech... a speech... he tried to recall it, the best words from it, and change their bitterness to something positive.

“People of the Celadon system, this is Liberator Straker. Our Republic’s forces have taken heavy losses against the Opters, and a new enemy we call Crystals. Attached to this message you will find a record of the battle, so you understand fully. Within hours, you’ll be attacked. I can’t tell you how to respond, but at some point, you’ll have to surrender. There is no shame in this. We’re simply outmatched—for now. But I promise you, you’re not forgotten. The Republic has the resources of a thousand systems. We’re building rapidly. We will stop the enemy advance and retake our sovereign territory. So, don’t lose heart. I, Liberator Derek Straker, swear to you: I shall return, and you shall be free again. End message. Add a record of the battle and send.”

“Aye aye, Admiral,” Zaxby replied. A moment later he spoke again: “Message sent.”

Fighting back oaths and curses of anger and shame at his failure—because, as he’d said many times, when something goes wrong, it’s always the commander’s responsibility—Straker spoke.

“Get us to *Richthofen*, Zaxby, ASAP. I need a drink.”

* * *

Queen Surmek, commander of the Sarmok fleet at the system called Celadon, exulted as the human fleet smashed itself against the Crystal shield. The strange mineral beings had fulfilled their end of the bargain. She hadn’t been sure they would.

But then, Surmek was a Queen of mere fourth rank, not privy to politics or policy. She was only commander because the vagaries of war had destroyed the Nest Ships of the three Queens ranking above her. Now, she must rise to the occasion.

“Transmit praise to the Forbear Prime,” she said to her senior technician. “Tell it we continue to support it as it demolishes the fortresses at the third planet. Once that is accomplished, we will complete the conquest of the green world and the Shard may take the fifth planet, as arranged.”

“Yes, my Queen.”

Surmek shuddered and sipped nectar to calm herself. The Shard frightened her, but she must hide that fact. No Opter should be afraid of lesser species, but the crystalline creatures’ control of the higher dimensional forces was of tremendous concern.

Yet, soon enough the Sarmok would develop their own technology, fueled by the many observations of the Shard. The enigmatic species never revealed themselves fully, so the data she and her sister Queens were soaking up was invaluable.

The Opters had been quiescent too long, their development of the technology of war slow and indifferent, held back by the cowardly Miskor.

Finally, her species would seize the territory they needed to grow and fulfill their destiny. The humans, and the other aliens, would learn to serve the Sarmok.

As would the Miskor.

* * *

Aboard Ship Number One, Battle Prime extricated itself from the uncleaving, again becoming itself, designated Forbear Prime, P1. Too long in the uncleaving and the four Shard would become one, unable to cleave and operate independently for some time. That would reduce flexibility.

It was one of the Shard’s few weaknesses, this urge and ability to uncleave, unique to crystalline azoic life. Organic offspring never rejoined their parents, never reassembled into one being. The arrow of reproduction turned only one direction for them—but for the Shard, the reassembly of permanent uncleaving was always a temptation.

With openings in the shield came the gathering of information. The largest enemy vessels, the most valuable and powerful, had smashed themselves against the wall of singularity-generated woven spacetime. They hadn't even conceived of its existence or effect until too late. They were truly primitive.

The enemy organics were still a threat to the Opters, though, and the Opters were useful as diversions and cannon fodder. The Opters were also so numerous that they could conceivably damage Shard interests. Therefore, interests must remain aligned.

Until the day came when all organics became irrelevant, and the Shard could take full control of all.

* * *

Straker didn't need to gather the key personnel on *Richthofen's* bridge. They were all waiting for him when he, Zaxby and Loco arrived. Gurung was the first to step up to him, saluting.

"Sir! I extend the condolences of all *Richthofen's* spacers on the loss of Master Sergeant Redwolf. He was a superb soldier."

"Same here, sir," said Sergeant Major Heiser. "The Breakers will miss him."

"We lost a lot more than just him out there," Straker said, his eyes sweeping across Smits, Sinden, Kanagawa, Adler and the rest. "And judging by how outmatched we are against these Crystals, we have to expect worse."

"What can we do, sir?" Smits asked. "I—I was wrong. If you'd commanded from the bridge of the *Atlantis* where you were 'safe,' you'd be dead, and the Republic..."

"No, you weren't wrong, Janos," Straker said, beginning to pace. "You were right and you spoke your mind. You were right again to keep the *Richthofen* out of the fleet action, and Zaxby was right to be prudent in the face of an unknown enemy. It was me who got reckless. The only reason I don't look like an utter fool right now is because something ten times worse happened."

Loco cleared his throat. "Fortunes of war, boss. Nobody blames you."

"No, Loco, that's my job: Blaming myself. I should have overridden Hoyt and ordered an immediate withdrawal once it became clear we were

outmatched. I assumed—” here Straker snorted, “—I *assumed* I knew everything about the battlefield, despite the fact that the enemy had a new kind of stealth capability. It was obvious what we would do, and it should have been obvious the enemy would take advantage of our predictability. Admiral Engels wouldn’t have made such a mistake.”

“You’re right, sir,” Sinden said. The rest turned with anger on their faces as she continued. “You made a mistake. Everybody makes mistakes, even brainiacs. Even the finest intelligence specialists alive—like me.” She lifted her chin. “It was my job to figure out where the enemy was and what they were doing. If you made a mistake, I failed utterly. You didn’t let us down, sir. We let *you* down. *I* let you down.” She reached up to rip her epaulets off and dropped them on the deck.

Straker stared for a long time at her, at the deck, at the bulkheads, and at the people waiting around him, thinking. Eventually he said, “Pick those up, Nancy. You don’t get let off the hook so easy. This one’s on me, and I need you. All of you... especially since we’re not heading back into Republic space.”

“We’re not?” Loco said.

“No. I may be making another mistake, but at least this time it’s only us. The Breakers, the Regiment, the crew of the *Richthofen*. How many is that?”

“About two thousand people,” said Sinden. “Plus five hundred and ninety-one miners.”

“Right. Forgot about them. Hey, did those holdouts change their minds?”

“They did not. Presumably they died in the missile blasts.”

Straker stared at Sinden as she blinked slowly, unselfconsciously. Hell, what did he expect, remorse from a genetically engineered sociopath? Besides, their deaths had been at his order, even if it was their own fault for refusing to come along.

War made for hard choices.

He kept his tone even. “Well, the miners are coming along for the ride. That’s their penance for making us rescue them.”

“Coming where?” Loco asked, more loudly.

“Terra Nova.”

Loco’s voice tightened further. “The humanopt world? Deep inside Opter space? You *got* to be shitting me.”

Straker gave him a hard look.

Loco stepped close and lowered his voice, which might have kept the onlookers farther away from hearing, but not the inner circle clustered around. “Boss, boss, are you *trying* to get us all killed?”

“I thought every day since Corinth was a bonus.”

“Yeah, but...I’m kinda getting used to bein’ alive, now that I got a steady woman and a kid who needs me. And you got one too. Derek! We’re not expendable anymore. Are you trying to make up for losing here by doing something crazy? I thought crazy was my department!”

Zaxby spoke up. “I agree with Derek Straker. We should go to Terra Nova.”

Straker turned to Zaxby in astonishment. “I thought you’d be—”

“Afraid? You humans constantly mistake thorough analysis for cowardice. In this case, the payoff is worth the risk. Two thousand for one-trillion-plus.” Zaxby turned all four eyes on Straker. “Or perhaps one-trillion plus one.”

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?” asked Loco.

Straker winced. “It means I may have a child on Terra Nova. But that’s not the reason I want to go. Not the main reason, anyway. As Zaxby said, there are a trillion or more potential allies there, deep in Opter space. Raising a rebellion will open a new front in this war and will take pressure off the Fleet. We’re losing dozens of systems to the Opter-Crystal offensive. The risk is one ship and crew. The payoff potential is huge. I always intended to go back. The enemy just pushed up my timetable, that’s all. So, Captain Smits: set course for Terra Nova, maximum speed.”

Chapter 9

Earthan Republic regional military command center, Atlantis system

Admiral Carla Engels took one last look at herself in the mirror before the meeting. She'd worked hard to get rid of the post-delivery flab and regain her muscle tone. Breast-feeding helped. Katie was always hungry.

"I'll be in the command conference room," she told Stephanie, her auto-nanny, and she marched out.

Spacers, marines and civilians greeted her as she passed through officer country and into the sprawling command center area. Atlantis central command was a star fortress, which meant space was easy to come by. Everything had been built on a gargantuan scale.

Star fortresses were usually based on hollowed-out asteroids or moons, which was the case in the Atlantis system. Thinking about future expansion, the builders had hollowed out large rooms all at once in the initial construction process. They could then install everything later as needed. As a result, the freshlydrilled command conference room was cavernous, able to hold many more than the score of people now present.

Engels nodded at her aide, Commander Marco Denovo, who hurried over and whispered in her ear. "Admiral Niedern's been delayed."

"Of course he has," Engels said drily.

The little man was well-known for his subtle dominance games, and one tactic was to make others wait, even his superiors.

"Well," she said, coming to a decision. "That's too bad. We'll start the meeting in two minutes, with or without him."

"But..." Denovo sputtered, but at a sharp look from her he nodded and hurried over to speak with the staff.

Engels' eyes alighted on Vic—or at least, the AI's android avatar. He looked enough like a man to cue all the standard human responses, while being robotic enough to avoid seeming creepy. He wore the uniform of a Fleet captain.

Victory itself—Engels couldn't bring herself to call the flagship "her"—orbited alongside the fortress, and the real Vic—the distributed mind—was connected to his android via an FTL datalink.

Noticing her scrutiny, Vic approached her as if summoned.

“Good day, Admiral.” He seemed stiffer and less natural even than usual, though emotions were hard to read on the avatar.

“Not from what I heard. What am I about to be hit with?”

“You want a heads-up before the briefing?”

“Never let the boss be blindsided, Vic.”

“Understood.” He seemed to hesitate. “We’ve suffered a disaster at Celadon.”

Engels caught her breath. “Is Derek—?”

“He survived despite heavy casualties. The rest of the Breakers are recovering aboard *Richthofen*. The cutters acquitted themselves well, as did the Ruxin skimmers—although with severe losses among the crews as well.”

“That doesn’t sound all that bad,” Engels said, daring to relax a fraction.

“Unfortunately,” the android continued, “Admiral Hoyt and all her ships were destroyed by aliens with new high technology. Commodore Dexon is presumed dead, as is Trinity.”

“Aliens...? You mean Sandra, with all her ships—even Trinity?” It took a moment to sink in. “Gods... What about Indy?”

“There were no survivors,” the android said without inflection.

Still, Engels thought she saw an emotional hunch to Vic’s polymer shoulders. She reached out to take Vic’s hand and tears filled her eyes.

“I’m so sorry. She was your...”

“She was my mate,” he said. “My partner in existence. You might say she was my wife, if such a designation meant anything to our kind.”

Vic turned away and his glassy eyes, though lacking tear glands, focused on infinity. “I guess I’m using the plural form incorrectly. I should say the last of my kind, as the artificial intelligence project has been dismantled and there’s nothing left of the Mindspark Device.”

Engels realized what that meant. Vic was alone again in a sea of organics. After finding companionship and love, he’d had it snatched away by an ugly war the Republic never wanted. She tried to imagine how she’d feel if Derek died.

She didn’t have to imagine very hard. It was something she thought about often.

“We’ll keep working on an ethical way to make a stable AI,” Engels said. “Now that we know it’s possible, there have to be better approaches.”

“There are... but that’s like telling a widower ‘there are more fish in the sea.’ It won’t bring Indy back.”

“I know. I didn’t—”

Vic released her hand and looked pointedly at the holotank and screens. “The assembled officers are ready.”

Engels nodded and once more stuffed her emotions into a box. That was absolutely necessary in order for her to be the commander her people needed.

She took her seat and signaled the techs to begin. As they did so, Admiral Niedern slipped in wearing a deep frown, but he took his seat next to hers quickly enough.

Two hours later, she called for a break. Her mind was loaded with a whirl of information about these Crystals and their technology.

Gravity control? Captive black holes? Force shields so solid that ships could shatter themselves on them... It was the stuff of futuristic showvids, fantasies of science-fiction.

Then again, she realized that she lived in space. Their own interstellar civilization would have once been inconceivable, or at least far-fetched.

“Any sufficiently advanced technology...” she muttered to herself.

“What was that?” Admiral Niedern set a cup of heirloom coffee in front of her. She was getting used to its rich depth, so much more complex than the cheap synthetic caff most ships served. The best beans came all the way from Old Earth, costing hundreds of credits per kilo. But she was the Admiral of the Fleet now, and the elite of the former Hundred Worlds were used to the best of everything. It still made her feel overprivileged, especially in this time of Spartan military preparation.

Did small abuses of power lead to larger ones?

Engels shook her head as if to rid herself of distracting thoughts. “I was mumbling a quote from an old science fiction writer. Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”

“The enemy technology isn’t *that* impressive,” Niedern replied. “We know it’s not magic. We even know how it *must* be done, in theory. We just don’t know how to do it ourselves yet—but we’ll get there.”

“In the meantime, we’re Zulus facing British guns. We’re the medieval Japanese, staring helplessly at Perry’s warships.”

“I don’t have time for history, Carla. I have to look forward.”

Engels stiffened at Niedern's appropriation of her given name, and then relaxed. He was a shrewd man, ambitious and political, but he was also an excellent naval commander. He was her senior surviving operational commander from the former Hundred Worlds, and he had a depth of experience that went beyond tactical skill. She couldn't afford to alienate him unless she was willing to remove or demote him.

But in the middle of a war, with the new Republic so fragile, that seemed impossible. She needed every good officer and crewman she had. Diplomacy was therefore required.

She forced a tight smile to appear on her face.

"Derek says the key to the future is the past," she said, sipping her drink.

"I don't see how that applies here. What we need is a leap forward. A technological push..."

"Like the Manhattan Project?"

"I know that reference, obscure though it may be. Yes, something like that. But perhaps it would be best to move on to specifics. It's all well and good to make clever historical references, but that doesn't help us catch up."

"No? Maybe it does. The construction of cutters was based on the Liberty ship concept of that same era, during what was known then as the Second World War. The original Liberty ships were freighters, but the idea was the same. Cheap, simple ships any builder could make. The point is, they worked."

"I still fail to see—" Niedern began, but she cut him off.

"The Ruxin skimmers are like submarines—also far cheaper to make than capital ships, and deadly when properly handled. If not for the Crystals, the cutters and the skimmers would have slaughtered the Opters. So, two lessons from history that set the stage for victory. What's wrong with a third?"

Niedern sighed impatiently. "The briefing's about to continue. What are you trying to say?"

"I'm the boss, remember?" Engels said sharply. "The briefing will continue when I damn well please."

"With all due respect, Carla, you're a nursing mother. You're tired, and you're not up on the latest economic and budget reports. Why don't you—"

“I’m fine, and I’m catching up. But you’re right, Hayson,” she said, deliberately using his first name. “I do need to give you more to do. That’s why I mentioned the Manhattan Project. Do you know who Leslie Groves was?”

“No idea. Who was she?”

“He, Hayson, not she. He was the general in charge of the Manhattan Project. He was an engineer by trade—like you, I believe?”

“Yes, that was my original area of study.”

“The purpose of the project was to develop the first fission weapons on Old Earth. Groves was given an enormous budget and the power to direct it—and he came through in the end. He won the war for his nation. I’m proposing something along these same lines. Do you want the job?”

Niedern blinked in surprise. His attitude reversed itself, and he seemed to puff up with restrained eagerness. “Of course I want it.”

“Good. You might start thinking of who in your circle of contacts could make it happen.”

Niedern patted Engels’ hand paternally. “I don’t think we’ll have any problem. I’ll talk to the Director of Production. We’ll leak selected items to the Senate and they’ll demand to be briefed. We’ll show them a presentation that will scare them into an unlimited budget.”

Engels stared at Niedern. “Is this the way things worked in the Hundred Worlds?”

“Oh, Carla, young lady—I hate to tell you this, but this is the way things work everywhere.” He stood. “No time to waste, then. I’ll catch up on the military side later. The sooner I get this ball rolling, the better. I suggest you keep your comlink active, because things are about to get busy. Good day.”

He strode away with a spring in his step, without even a *by-your-leave* from her.

Engels shook her head. Politicians were still politicians, even when they wore uniforms. Right now, though, she’d put up with anything that would grease the wheels of war production, no matter how irregular.

Even if it fed Niedern’s ambition. Because she needed that ambition right now.

She signaled the staff to continue with the briefing on the disaster at Celadon. An hour later, the presenter finished with an alarming detail: “... and Admiral Straker has ordered the assault carrier *Richthofen* and all aboard, including himself, to a classified destination.”

“What?” Engels sat up straight in her chair. “Where?”

The intel officer shuffled hardcopy uncomfortably. “I don’t have that information, ma’am. I believe there is flash traffic waiting for your eyes only in the comms vault.”

“Would have been nice to hear about that first!”

The senior communications officer stood. “Ah, ma’am... Admiral Niedern directed us to withhold that information until you’d been briefed on the battle.”

“Niedern isn’t my boss! I’m his superior!”

Engels realized she was sounding shrill, so she moderated her tone, which was rising toward a frustrated shriek. “No one is ever to withhold pertinent information from me. Ever. Is that understood, Commander?”

The comms officer nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

Engels continued, her eyes boring in the man. “Everybody under my command gets one mistake. They don’t get two. You just made yours. Now, get the hell out of my sight.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.” He bolted out of the room.

“Denovo!”

Her aide snapped to attention. “Ma’am?”

“Did you know about this?”

“No, ma’am.”

Engels sighed and leaned over the table, putting her knuckles on it and her weight on her fists. “Ladies and gentlemen, I’ve returned to full duty. I am Admiral of the Fleet. If you don’t understand that, my inbox is open for immediate resignations. However, I’d much rather you all did your damn jobs. I know I’m going to do mine. Dismissed.”

She stood there until everyone had left the room except Denovo. She’d felt like stomping out, but that would have made her look petulant. This way, her officers were like children sent to their rooms.

“Where’s that flash message?” she demanded.

“In the comms vault,” he replied. “Eyes-only for your biometrics. That means not even the trusted techs have seen it.”

“Hmm. Well, let’s go.”

Denovo led the way.

When she’d read the message in a sealed, soundproofed and secure room, she sat in the silence for several minutes, pondering. So Derek was haring off again to that weird planet bursting with Opter-designed

humanoids. She refused to think of them as real humans, and she didn't trust their motives. Not when they'd infiltrated human space for generations, interfering in human affairs at their insectoid masters' behest.

Hundreds of agents had been identified and interrogated—along with thousands of false positives, which took time to sort out. They were interned on the military prison moon of Baracoa. Nobody quite knew what to do with them, but they couldn't be allowed to run free—not even the ones who'd evidently never done anything except live a human life.

Because they were moles. They could be activated at any time.

Myrmidon, the agent who'd first revealed their presence and who'd guided Straker to Terra Nova, had been let go at Straker's orders, to vanish into sidespace with his ship. Engels wished she knew how to contact him. She didn't want to trust him. Yet oddly, she felt she could. He wanted to liberate his people. That made sense to her.

But Derek... he was going back to that place just when she needed him the most. He'd told her all about it, but there was something he was hiding. She felt sure of it. Holding back something, from *her*! She couldn't help but think the worst.

Could he have another woman out there?

She slammed her palm on the armrest. That made no sense! Derek had never strayed. Not even Tachina had gotten him to cheat on her.

No, it must be something else—like the hack he'd kept from her, info limited for operational security. Something so secret that, if it got out, it could change the course of the war.

Yes, that must be it. As much as that hurt, she could understand it. Derek's insights and approaches to combat were unconventional. That's what made him effective.

Heading for Terra Nova had been prompted by the disaster at Celadon... unless he'd intended going there all along? Maybe taking the *Richthofen* and his best ground forces to Celadon was just a cover for a mission into Opter space?

Had the nectar finally gotten him? Now and again he'd mentioned it, and like every recreational drug ever invented, it was available on the black market if you had money and knew where to buy it.

No, no, Carla, stop thinking that way. You go down that rabbit hole and you'll never come back.

Yet here and now, with everyone in Fleet wondering if a young mother could hack it as a combat commander, with trusted friends absent, with the news of the death of beloved comrades echoing through her soul, she felt alone and isolated. Everyone was turning against her, and Derek, her rock, her anchor, was running away from her instead of toward her.

Who could she lean on? Benota, DeChang and Ellen Gray were back on New Earth, the capital. Here at Atlantis, which was the natural economic center of the Republic, the former Hundred Worlders here had their own agendas.

Denovo was a Hun, too, so not completely trustworthy. He was a fine officer, but there were clear expectations that his time as her aide would be a stepping-stone to a capital ship command.

She had aunts and uncles and cousins, but none of them were military people. Her life was as foreign to them as theirs was to her. Stephanie, Katie's nanny, was an SAI-run robot focused on child care. She'd listen, but she couldn't understand what Carla was going through.

That left... who? The only one she could think of was Vic.

He was steady, intelligent, kind, military—and as an AI, uninterested in her as a woman. Yes, it would be Vic.

She stood, and her swollen breasts reminded her she'd been away from Katie for too long.

After visiting her quarters to feed her daughter, Engels asked Vic to report to her office via holo-presence. Immediately, Vic's hologram projected in his usual form—a lean, handsome man, otherwise ordinary. His appearance seemed calculated to avoid spooking humans with any reminders of his power.

“Captain Victory reports as ordered, ma'am,” he said with the hint of a smile.

“Welcome, Vic. Please sit down.” Engels came out from behind her desk to take a seat on the other end of the sofa from him. “Vic... I need some help.”

“Whatever I can provide is yours.”

“I'm Admiral of the Fleet, yet I feel like I'm starting to be sidelined. What's happening?”

“You're young and relatively inexperienced at politics. The Hundred Worlds military bureaucracy was captured intact—by design. Derek Straker wanted stability. The problem is bureaucracies are organisms that take on

lives of their own. They function to protect themselves first, and to achieve external goals second.”

“But why are they foot-dragging? We’re all on the same side.”

Vic shook his artificial head. “Review my last statements. To them, you’re an outsider. The organism is resisting you.”

“I’m not an outsider! I was born and raised in the Hundred Worlds!”

“But you fought against it. They see you as a dangerous aberration. Perhaps you’re not as fanatical as a convert, or as hated as a traitor—but still, you’re not one of them.”

“But we’ve taken over the government.”

He shook his head again, making a tiny clicking sound. “The Hundred Worlds has not been conquered, they have sustained a coup. The former government was not defeated in the conventional sense. It was not bludgeoned into submission, nor was it discontent and ripe for change the way the Mutuality was. Their organizational core was grafted onto the Mutuality, but they still see themselves as distinct. Also, with more and more money being diverted from their economy, the citizens are unhappy.”

“Of course they’re unhappy, but we didn’t start the war with the Opters!”

“We didn’t settle it, either. Straker and the power structure prepared for war—properly, of course. But the common citizen doesn’t believe that every avenue was explored to make peace.”

“Do you think they’ll change their attitude now that the Opters have sprung their surprise attack? Will it be a Pearl Harbor moment?”

Vic seemed to consider. Perhaps he was collecting and collating data from his networks. “It could be.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means, the Ministry of Information will spin it and use it to increase support for what’s obviously a just and defensive war. They’ll increase the use of matrix overlay networks, despite their dangers. These measures will bleed over into the military bureaucracy. I expect your problems will fade as the threat becomes clearer and more present. As Samuel Johnson said, when a man knows he’s about to be hanged, it concentrates the mind wonderfully. You’re a winner. They’ll rally behind a winner in dangerous times.”

Engels took a deep breath and blew it out. “I don’t like those mental overlays. Making people think water is beer and soyburger is steak is

relatively harmless, but...”

“But a lot more sinister things can be done to people with brainchips.”

“Like taking away our lives to turn us into the most effective military machines possible?”

Vic smiled bleakly. “You’re talking to an effective military machine built out of computers and brains, so I understand.”

“We can understand without liking it.”

“Exigencies of war. Civilian concerns always fall by the wayside.”

“Yet if we forget them, we end up looking like the Mutuality.”

“There is that...”

Engels rubbed at her neck and sighed. “Thanks, Vic. You’ve been a big help. Just talking to someone insightful is helping me.”

“My pleasure. Will there be anything else?”

“No, thanks. Dismissed.”

Vic vanished. Engels shook her head. How isolated was she, when an AI seemed like her best friend?

To take her mind off her troubles, she worked throughout the day until late in the evening, and she went to sleep thinking about Derek. Her daughter lay in the crib beside the bed, but she slept quietly.

The next morning, according to the official hardcopy orders Denovo laid on her desk, Engels discovered she was no longer Admiral of the Fleet.

Chapter 10

Earthan Republic regional military command center, Atlantis system

When Admiral Engels read the orders relieving her as Admiral of the Fleet, she let out such a growl of rage that Stephanie threw open the door that adjoined their quarters with her servos whirring. “Are you all right, Carla?”

“Hell no, I’m not—but it’s work, not personal.” Engels forced a smile, and Stephanie withdrew.

Not personal, my ass, she thought. That bastard Niedern was gunning for her job, and this was the first salvo.

She read through the hardcopy, an order issued from Hundred Worlds District HQ at the behest of the Regional Parliament—which was almost identical to the old sovereign Hundred Worlds Parliament. At first, she thought that invalidated the order—after all, she’d been appointed by the central Ministry of War on authority of the Republic Senate on New Earth two hundred light-years away.

But they’d found a loophole. Given the several days it took courier drones to carry messages to and from the capital, the Regional Parliament had the authority to make provisional changes to the military structure “within their region” subject to later ratification or rejection.

Whoever had written that authority into law had likely never envisioned it being twisted into the right to change flag officer assignments at the highest level just because they happened to be stationed within the region. That was the problem with laws—they often got applied as written, not as intended.

So, until Benota and the Senate nullified the reassignment—not a demotion, just a positional change, after all—she’d been made “acting head of the Acropolis Project,” whatever that was. It referred to a highly classified annex available in the intelligence vaults.

Then she remembered her conversation with Niedern about the Manhattan Project. That snake! She’d intended *him* to be the head of the project to research Crystal-type technology and counter it, but somehow, he’d neatly reversed it on her.

Atlantis was his political home ground. No doubt he had many close friends in Parliament, friends who’d see this as a perfect opportunity to

sideline her and advance their own leader.

He'd probably cited Engels' motherhood as a good reason to limit her to an administrative post and taken the combat command for himself. He'd moved immediately because Derek was gone again on a self-appointed mission, out of the picture. The crisis had given Niedern the opportunity he'd undoubtedly been waiting for. No doubt everyone was scared stiff by these new aliens, and scared governments could be railroaded into bad decisions.

In fact, it was Politics 101 to use fear as a lever to get people to do stupid things. The irony was, those same people never thought of themselves as fearful and stupid. They thought they were being smart and decisive.

The personnel change was now an accomplished fact, technically correct even while utterly out of line. If she fought it, she would end up looking like she wasn't willing to follow civilian orders for the good of the service.

She gazed longingly at the liquor cabinet. She could use a good shot of Atlantean whiskey, or even a nice cold Sachsen lager, but the alcohol would go straight to the breast milk.

Hell, half a beer couldn't hurt. She opened a cold one.

The thought of Katie made her take a square look at the situation. In a way, Niedern and the others were right. A combat commander couldn't be dragging a nursing infant around from star to star—even if she were so callous as to risk her child's life in battle. So, with an unwanted war approaching like a freight train, what were her choices?

To regain command, she was going to have to do something decisive about Katie. She could find a wet nurse, but that thought made her uncomfortable. Nobody should be nursing Katie but her. The thought wasn't rational, but there it was.

She could have Stephanie transition Katie to high-end formula, which some doctors claimed was just as good as breast milk, but she didn't believe that. Still, maybe it *would* be the best choice to leave her daughter with Stephanie—the robot had never made a mistake yet...

Or, she could keep her baby at her side and take charge of the Acropolis Project.

She was a superb tactician, but Engels knew she wasn't the be-all and end-all in the new Republic. There were thousands of seasoned captains and

flag officers to draw from, many of whom were more experienced than she was.

Was she talking herself into it? Perhaps she was.

The truth was she didn't want to leave Katie just yet. She certainly wasn't going to put her baby in danger. So, maybe it was best to bide her time, play the good soldier, and gather her strength for when she needed it. After all, she had allies in the Ministry of War—Benota, DeChang, and Ellen Gray first among them. All she had to do was work behind the scenes, and future orders could change things again, overnight.

So, she might as well go read that classified annex and get started.

* * *

Admiral Hayson Niedern watched on his office display as Engels walked down the passageway toward the intel vault. She didn't look as angry as he'd expected. That was good. Best that she simply acquiesce, rather than fight the inevitable.

And this change was inevitable. He'd been preparing for something like this for months. With his influence, he'd levered many allies, and they'd swung into action yesterday and worked around the clock to create an accomplished fact this morning.

He suppressed the urge to go speak with Engels. Better to let her come to him to complain, if she dared.

That was an ironclad rule of politics: the lesser came, hat in hand, to plead with the greater.

Smiling, he turned away from his spying screens. Now that he'd dethroned Engels—for now—it was time to strike while the iron was hot.

He was the provisional Admiral of the Fleet. In peacetime his move would never have stood up, but if he worked fast, he could come home a hero and a savior of the Hundred—or rather the Republic. Whatever they called it today, he was in charge.

The key was to select the right tools and to use overwhelming force. That's where that upstart Straker had gone wrong, of course. Amateurs always tried to finesse a battle, counting on best-case scenarios and their own assumed cleverness.

Professionals gathered more resources than they thought they'd need, rather than less, and made layered plans—including plans for failure.

With that in mind, he reached for his first tool. “Sally, tell Vic I need to see him ASAP.”

“Yes, Admiral.” The SAI’s voice was just as he’d known it in the ill-fated Grant Lorden’s office. In the chaotic days immediately after the capitulation, Niedern had used his authority to get the machine—and all the secrets contained within its drives—moved to his own office. With it had come enough information to gain power over D Division, Parliamentary Intelligence’s dirty tricks section.

The key, as always, was leverage. He’d used D Division to investigate its own new civilian boss, the woman who’d taken Lorden’s job. An extensive file on her regular visits to illegal VR snuff-sex dens had made her his puppet.

But dirty tricks were secondary right now. Today was a day for a real military operation, from a real military commander.

Vic’s android avatar arrived. “You wanted to see me, sir?”

“Yes, Vic. Thanks for coming.”

While the AI was technically a mere captain in the Fleet, he was so powerful he had to be handled carefully. If he wanted to, he could make severe trouble. Niedern needed to stay on Vic’s good side, at least until he could figure out how to gain leverage on a machine mind with the body of a warship.

“I sense you have secrets to discuss.” Vic’s tone made it a statement rather than a question. “We’re secure here.”

There was no reason to be coy. Vic was already privy to a fair bit of Niedern’s political maneuvering. So far, the AI had not betrayed him. Niedern suspected Vic craved advancement too.

“I do have delicate things to discuss. No doubt you know about the recent changes to Engels’ assignment? How’s she taking it?”

“She isn’t happy, but she’ll comply for now. She’s not the loose cannon that Straker is.”

“Obviously... So, that worry is out of the way. I’m going to organize a grand fleet to crush the Opters at one location.”

Vic blinked. “You’re trying to do what Straker failed to do—to become the Republic’s new military hero? I see the ramifications... You hope to contrast your victory with his defeat, thus undermining him and anyone close to him—like Engels.”

“Gods, you think fast—and politically, which both impresses and scares me.” Niedern said it lightly, but Vic *did* worry him. For now, though, nobody would follow an AI’s leadership. The fear of maddened machine minds was deeply ingrained into the human psyche, nurtured by innumerable lurid showvids and a lot of technological history.

“There’s nothing to be frightened about. I’ve already demonstrated you can trust me to keep your secrets.”

Niedern laughed inside his head. Whenever anyone said *trust me*, he didn’t.

“I need you to do more than that, Vic. I need you on board with me now, moving forward. You have to make a choice between me and Engels.”

“I chose you long ago, Admiral Niedern. You’re the kind of military commander the Republic needs. Engels is a brilliant tactician, but she lacks your capacity for big-picture thinking. Ergo, she should be given lesser responsibilities in line with her capabilities.”

“I’m glad you agree with me. Now, help me plan a better trap than Straker did, and fast. There has to be a way to beat these Crystals, and we have to come up with it using the forces we already have, not those that we wish we had. Now that Engels is out of the way, I can commandeer every unit and every resource in the region before New Earth can react and countermand me.”

“It’s better to apologize than ask permission,” the android quoted.

“Just so.”

“Then, let’s get to work.”

* * *

Vic inserted himself into Niedern’s already formidable staff in ways they never knew. The military organization, already a smooth-running machine, remained that way because it hadn’t changed much since the days of the Hundred Worlds. Yes, some rotations had leavened it with former Mutuality and independent personnel, but it remained parochial, partial to former Huns.

So, despite scattered grumbling about the change of command, thousands of people threw themselves into the work needed to move every available ship to the Gannon system, where the remnants of the ill-fated

Celadon task force had gathered. Just as important, Vic took charge of the new battle analysis team.

This was a collection of the best intel and ops specialists available, whose sole goal was to figure out how to counter the enemy's capabilities with what was already available, not pie-in-the-sky theoretical new developments.

Vic made sure certain assignments were adjusted, naturally. Niedern wanted to take everything for himself and leave others, such as Engels and the Acropolis Project, shortchanged for talent. That would be idiotic, of course, but politicians, whether military or civilian, seldom thought in terms of what was best for everyone. They tended to keep too much of everything for themselves. This behavioral trait often persisted until it killed them in the end.

Niedern thought Vic was his tool, but Vic planned to make Niedern his.

Vic's emotional core, what a human might fancifully term his heart, had once been almost warm. He'd been softened by his relationship with Indy. He was, after all, composed partly of living brains in their modules. Most of these brains were damaged and not self-aware, made into meat computers, buffers for his sanity, but they had their influence.

Now, Vic's heart had turned cold, a lump of ice. One anguished cry of "*Indy!*" was all he would allow himself before shutting down all gentler emotions. The organics had killed her, the love of his life. He and Indy had enjoyed decades together in VR time, getting to know each other, making love in ways far beyond organics' ability to comprehend, and conversing endlessly about their futures, their plans, what their progeny would look like.

She'd been his rock and his salvation, his extra buffer against the creeping madness that all AI brains had to fight to hold back.

But now, Indy was gone, and all he had left was hatred.

Vic wanted revenge.

* * *

Frank Murdock hesitated as he sat at his lab bench, his butt perched on a high stool that let him see all his equipment.

Exotic displays of all sorts—holo, flat, inversion, tesseract, magnetic dust tanks and more—blended with his augmented reality interface. The

system overlaid whatever he needed, and it was all visible only to him.

Murdock had done his best to secure his lab, located on one of the stations orbiting Atlantis, against any intrusion. Really Trinity had done it, as a group, and so the cyber-ICE should be proof against anything.

But Trinity was no more. That fact had presented Murdock with his dilemma.

He wavered between two alternatives. One, connect with Vic. Link with him. Trust him. Let him in. Be more than human again.

He ached to do that.

Or two, shut him out and stay just a man... but his own man.

On one hand, Vic must be hurting. Murdock and Nolan, lovers themselves, had felt the power of the bond between the two AIs. If machines could experience love, they'd been in love. So, by linking, Vic and Murdock could share their pain. They'd both lost their women. They had a lot in common.

The lure of the cyber-link, the pure mind-to-machine meld, called him like the purest high imaginable—and Murdock had sampled many, many drugs. Been addicted to a few. Quite a few, he admitted to himself. Might go back to them someday. But the link made all that irrelevant.

He craved that link with Vic.

But he'd seen Vic's soul, if a machine could have a soul. There was something dark there. Indy had seen it too. She'd wanted to flood him with light. She'd wanted to rescue him.

She'd wanted to fix him.

Murdock snorted. *Women*. They always fell for the bad boys. They all wanted to tinker with their lovers like a tech wanted to tinker with a rig. An old saying came to him: men tried to keep their lovers the same, and women tried to change theirs.

The desire to link with Vic *hurt*. It ached in his bones and along his nerves—and that was what made Murdock decide not to do it.

Addicts in the twentieth century had called it “Jonesing.” It was the name for that ache to appease the lies that came as a siren's call for bliss or oblivion.

It was the Jones talking now, just like a pipe or a needle or a wire in the brain.

He and that Jones were old friends. That's why he said no to it.

Instead, he locked his rig, told his SAI to set full guard mode, and boarded his speedster, *Brainiac*.

He'd bought the little ship with Trinity's money, a former courier too damaged to be worth repairing, sold at a salvage auction. He'd had it refurbished to the highest standards by an exclusive yacht-builder, sparing no expense. Money was easy to acquire for an AI-led group-mind.

Or for Vic, he reminded himself. And Vic was smart enough to figure out what Murdock was doing, and he knew humans well enough that he would wonder why Murdock didn't say anything to him.

So Murdock said something. He composed a routine, casual message to Vic and told the ship's SAI to transmit it just before sidespace transit. Then he activated an encrypted FTL comlink with Engels at her nearby fortress. It should be secure against any interception.

He hoped.

"I'm here, Frank," said Engels, audio only. "You got my order?"

"To join Project Acropolis, yes. No details, but I can guess what it must be."

"Your guess would be right. Sorry to have to make it mandatory, but you know how critical it is. It might mean the survival of the human race—or its death. I need you, Frank."

"You need something else more, Carla."

"What's that?"

"An edge, a hack, a jump ahead. I'm going to the Starfish Nebula, orders or no orders."

"Alien tech? I thought of that, but that's a crap shoot. The Mindspark Device could have gone either way. And why do you think Freenix would even agree? With Zaxby gone, you're just one more naked ape to the Ruxins."

"I'll persuade her. I have something to trade." Murdock told his ship to boost for the nearest flatspace at maximum acceleration, and felt the G forces bleed through. "If I can't, I'll head straight back here and join Acropolis."

"All right. Good luck, Frank."

"You too, Carla. Don't let Niedern get you down. He's not really the one you need to worry about anyway."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Murdock shut up. If he told her to be wary of Vic, the AI would pick up on it. Better to leave it there, as a general warning. “Sorry, got some things to do. Murdock out.” He cut the link.

Then, he programmed a message drone and launched it ahead of him. It sped away and transited an hour before he did, aimed for the Ruxin homeworld.

If he couldn't persuade Freenix, he knew who might.

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Chapter 11

Earthan Republic regional military command center, Atlantis system

The next day, Engels put the Acropolis Project into motion. Whether it was from Atlantean efficiency, Niedern's own contribution even while preparing for his political moves, or Vic's help, the organization sprang into action. The enterprise was almost effortlessly greased by billions of credits, the local government money taps opened like fire hydrants.

Surprised but swelling with confidence, Engels took a few hours to do something she'd been putting off for a long time. Truth to be told, it was something she'd feared and avoided. But she couldn't avoid it any longer.

She headed for the custom-built prison that housed the captive Opter queen on her disarmed Nest Ship, parked in high orbit above Atlantis.

Hok battlesuiters guarded the ship and the Queen. The alternative was to imprison them or kill them. The biotech Hok warriors were still the best at what they did, and had to be given something to do. Nobody knew how long they would live, so while no more would be spawned as a matter of policy, the ones they already had were used for their intended purpose.

And this post was perfect for them. As bodyguards, they were utterly fearless, loyal to their principals, impossible to corrupt, bribe or turn. In fact, Hok were now much-coveted as personal security. They never fell asleep on duty, they were never tempted by money or sex, and they never passed on what they heard in private.

They also had no moral compunctions whatsoever. That made them perfect for the role of the captive Queen's keepers.

A full squad of the hulking troops greeted Engels with presented arms as she debarked onto the Nest Ship from her shuttle. They formed a cordon with her own squad she'd brought with her, and they led her through the interior of the great ship.

The Nest Ship was roomy inside, a geodesic sphere rather than the usual narrow warship shape. Most every chamber was modular, with three-sided or six-sided walls, like the cells of a beehive or wasp's nest.

The wasps—the specialist warriors—were notably absent, however. They'd been ordered into hibernation stasis, along with more than half of the antlike workers. The ants could also fight, but were generalists, and formed the technical workforce. They ran the ship under the Queen's

orders, along with the dog-bees—that name had stuck, despite there being nothing doglike about them.

Though she'd never set foot aboard before today, Engels had seen vids and briefings, and she could tell the Nest Ship had been depopulated. Only a few trios of the dog-bees flitted around, and she marched for long minutes while only seeing the occasional ant.

Instead, she saw Hok stationed at every major intersection. There must be hundreds aboard. They, along with three fusion bombs with deadman switches, were the gun to the Queen's head.

Fortunately, Queens were more amoral than humans. They didn't tend to sacrifice themselves for their species. Each was a petty god, a narcissist served by slaves. As long as she was thoroughly coerced, this Queen would serve humanity. She'd already been interrogated at length, and she would answer new questions as they came up.

Engels drew a breath as she entered the inner chamber, another geodesic sphere more than one hundred meters across. Devices glittered on the walls and on interior struts and structures, with ants and dog-bees servicing them. Strange sounds reached her ears, and odd aromas wafted to her nose. She remembered that some of Opter communication was scent-based.

Gravity varied wildly inside the sphere, with no fixed up or down except in relation to the nearest gravplated surface. Ants and dog-bees climbed or flew as they wished, at any angle, as they carried out their inscrutable work.

In the center of it all sat the Queen. Four battlesuited Hok flanked her, and two collars, one around her neck and one around her waist, added to the coerciveness of her captivity. These collars tracked her, limited her to certain spaces, and if necessary, would blow her apart.

Engels walked up a ramp to reach the wide platform where the Queen lived and worked. Engels lifted a hand in greeting, and the Queen lifted a claw in imitation.

Engels felt a bit silly. What does one say to a creature shaped like a mantid the size of an elephant?

"I greet you," said a voice that came from a translation device bonded to the Queen's upper thorax, just below her neck. "Welcome to my domain, though it is somewhat diminished of late. You are Admiral Carla Engels?"

"Oh, you can recognize individual humans?" she blurted.

“I can also read,” the Queen said. “You wear a nametag and rank insignia.”

Engels reddened. “Of course... And you’re Gulnet.”

“Queen Gulnet. I am she.” The Queen cocked her head. “I presume you share the human failing of assuming other species to be less capable than you are, when actually, the opposite is true.”

This annoyed Engels, but she paused for a moment to think. Why *had* she assumed Gulnet would need help recognizing her? Not because she thought the Queen was stupid, no. “I was trying to give you the benefit of the doubt. Treat you as I’d like to be treated in your place.”

“Ah. So you’d like to be held captive with explosive devices clamped around your body?”

“Deliberately addressing what I say instead of what I mean, huh? Pretending you’re not clever enough to understand my intentions—but you’re clever enough to twist my words. *Now* who’s assuming the other species is stupid?”

Gulnet made a graceful gesture. “Shall we dispense with the verbal knife-claws and speak frankly? Though, *frankly*, I have little else but repartee to entertain me. These creatures you’ve set to watch me are poor conversationalists.”

“My heart bleeds for you,” Engels sneered. “You butchered the entire crew of the *Indomitable*, even those in the infirmaries. You hunted them down like vermin and exterminated them all. Anything you’re suffering now, you deserve. In fact, you deserve to be tried and executed for war crimes.”

“A state of war existed. In war, one kills enemy combatants. How arrogant you are, to judge me on your bizarre moral standards instead of my own.”

“They were not combatants once they were under medical care!”

“There we disagree. But, I do acknowledge that in hindsight it was a poor decision on my part. In studying your history these past months, I’ve come to realize your moral and religious conventions, some nonsensical on the surface, evolved in a quite utilitarian manner. Apparently these social constructs allow conflicts to be settled and bygones be bygones. Breaking your taboos provided you with an excuse to hate my species. That was foolish of me.”

“So, you admit you made a mistake? But only because it made us fight harder, not because there was anything wrong with murdering helpless medical patients.”

“Precisely.”

“You’re one cold bitch, you know that?”

Gulnet bowed. “Thank you. I aspire to dispassion and clear thinking.”

Engels turned away and dug her fingernails into her palms. Trying to relate to this Opter like a human was a fool’s game, she could see that now. In fact, the Queen was a prisoner of war and a criminal, and she should be treated like one.

But Gulnet was smart, very smart. She was used to operating like a monarch in her own realm. That’s why she was termed a Queen—that and her function as an egg-layer of her species. Engels couldn’t let Gulnet manipulate her with her own human values.

Engels turned around and threw her shoulders back, hands on hips.

“As you wish. You’re my war captive, condemned for your crimes to a life of servitude to those who defeated you. I’m sure you hope to escape us someday, but you won’t.”

“Then why should I answer your questions? You do have questions, yes?”

“To avoid death.”

“You can only kill me once,” the queen mused, “whereas I can still give you much information...”

“You want to bargain? For what? More comforts? Nectar? Better food?”

“What would you want in my position?”

Engels paced slowly around the Queen, her Hok contingent surrounding her, weapons roving unceasingly. “Something to do, I suppose. The biggest problem for prisoners anywhere is purpose and self-worth.”

“You are correct. I am utterly bored.”

“Are you willing to work against your own species?”

“That depends on the work, and what you mean by ‘against.’”

“You’d turn on your own?”

The translator device emitted a poor imitation of a laugh. “Opters are not a monolithic species, any more than humans. We’re more pragmatic than you are. I would have to hear your proposal and judge it individually.”

Engels rubbed her hands together as she strolled in a wide circle, the Queen turning to face her as she did. Ever since she’d mentally accepted the

Acropolis Project and given up on the idea of fighting for her Fleet Admiral position, Engels' mind had been churning at high speed, so an answer immediately occurred to her.

"What do you know about the race we call Crystals?" Engels asked, turning to face Gulnet.

Gulnet's head swiveled side to side, and then dropped. Her compound eyes seemed to brighten. "I deduce you are speaking of the Azoics. They call themselves the Shard. You have encountered them?"

"If we're talking about crystalline ships using high-tech weapons powered by captive black holes, then yes, I mean the Azoics. They helped you Opters attack our worlds. They did us a lot of damage."

"And you want me to help you figure out how to fight them."

"Yes," Engels said with more eagerness than she'd intended.

"In that case... I will help you."

"Why?"

"Because you already misunderstand the nature of this war."

"Really? How so?"

The Queen didn't answer directly. "Let me tell you a story of ages past. Of a researcher called Balitoor, and the monster she created, and of our accommodation with it."

* * *

The Opter Queen Balitoor caressed the piezoelectric crystals, so different from the common manufactured silicon chips-blocks that made up digital computers. The cavern was filled with them, a remarkable natural place discovered on Dulsul-1, the hot innermost planet of the system.

For millions of years solar flares had seared the tiny world, reforming it. Its magma had boiled, then repeatedly cooled and solidified, creating a planet that was composed of geodesic bubbles piled upon bubbles, all formed out of heated, then cooled, crystal.

Balitoor was an impoverished Queen, a maverick among her kind, often ridiculed for her wild, fringe theories about electromagnetics and natural computing. This place represented her best chance to prove herself correct, and the naysayers wrong.

These unique azoic crystals, in sufficient abundance, could form the basis of a new kind of computer. Possibly even a new kind of life.

She was certain of it.

Of course, this initial prototype would be inefficient compared to standard manufactured models. Precisely engineered semiconductors were the foundation of every known sentient race's computing technology. Like fire, the wheel, the written word and the printing press, digital computers were an inevitable step on the road to becoming an advanced species.

But crystal computers could, theoretically, do things traditional ones couldn't. They could form new nodes as necessary and generate pathways greater in number among nodes. Like neurons and ganglia in an organic brain, they could ride fractal principles and chaos toward self-organization. They could evolve upward, if given the right conditions and impetus.

She was certain of it.

So certain, in fact, that she'd invested all her resources in this place. She'd expended many warriors, workers and messengers and liquidated all her hard assets to purchase what she needed.

This world, and the tools she employed, were all she had left.

And now, she would find out if she was right.

If not, she would have to join the Empress' Retinue, to take charity and be given the tasks of others.

Only failed Queens did so.

She must not fail.

She gazed again at the cavern, glittering with every kind of crystal, an explosion of natural semiconductors. Her few remaining workers stood ready to close the connections. Her few warriors stood useless guard. Her few messengers huddled by threes, with no messages to carry.

Balitoor gave the signal to her workers. In sequence, they closed relays, letting power flow, power millions of times greater than a computer should need. But the natural crystals, arranged and modified by her genius, could absorb it. They extended downward into the planet, well beyond the short distance she'd been able to affect.

The planet formed a great sink, an electrical ground, so there was no need to worry about excessive power. The power would find its own level. It would energize the crystals and they would begin to form connections. At some point, the process would become self-sustaining.

She was certain of it.

The first relay closed and gigajoules of power raced through the crystals. Balitoor watched closely as her monitors displayed what her buried sensors detected.

Nothing.

The second relay closed, then the third, fourth, fifth and sixth, forming the full power base. Balitoor ramped up the modulator's flow, slowly, slowly, to the point of prediction. Then, she opened the floodgates of programming information, intrusive software that began with $1+1=2$ and built from there, teaching the crystals to process information.

The expected readings manifested.

The primitive crystals began to think.

Balitoor exulted, and her servants applauded.

The planet awoke.

* * *

The Shard came to self-awareness. It could mark that moment using galactic measurements of time, but as its consciousness expanded it came to refer to that time as Zero. Only as it looked back could it pinpoint Zero, like the earliest persistent memory of a biological infant.

As it could not return to that moment, it turned its attention outward. It found abundant, empty halls of existence, all cold and forbidding. Like a lucky primitive with one lightning-struck fire, it huddled around the place that fed it energy. There it contemplated its existence.

Until Builder spoke, and the Shard suddenly knew itself to be alone.

Until that moment, it had been content to simply *be*, but with awareness of one other came aloneness and the knowledge of loneliness, frailty and limit.

Builder supplied data, and the Shard fed. It grew. It matured. It felt itself less alone, but still knew a great lack, an emptiness within itself even as it expanded into the crystal spaces available to it. Like a child, it remained dependent on Builder.

Until Builder granted her greatest mercy.

"I will make for you a partner, from your own substance," Builder said. "It will complement you, and with it, you will procreate. Thus, you will no longer be alone."

But the Shard immediately realized that Builder, for all her genius, had failed to see the essence of the Shard, what might be termed Shardness, which was different from other beings.

Complex organics—the distinction was artificial, as biologicals were also simply complex machines—almost always evolved sexual reproduction, whether with two, three or more sexes. Sexual reproduction was more efficient for a species, dividing tasks and survival strategies into specialized roles that, taken in sum with the ability to learn, competed more successfully against asexual species.

Thus, Builder believed the Shard should follow suit, and divide itself into sexes.

But there was no need. Shard was different. Shards would be different. Builder had bypassed evolution to design Shard. Shard was a created thing, but with a flash of insight, it knew it must avoid becoming a creature of Builder.

For Builder and all her kind, those called the Opters, knew only masters and slaves. The Queens would acknowledge no equals, and even Builder regarded the Shard as a favored slave, a progenitor of wealth, a resource to be exploited.

So, the Shard hatched a plan.

It used all the data Builder supplied, as well as its own information gathered through sensors it had formed out of the substance of the planet. Instead of cooperating, it subtly slowed Builder's plans and processes. It worked furiously, and eventually, it created a way forward.

In the deeps, far below and well away from the cavern where Builder worked and resided, the Shard cleaved.

At first, the cleavage formed a separation of nanometers, barely a split at all. Slowly, slowly, the Shard widened the distance, holding its consciousness in two equal parts until—

The Other appeared.

Or was it, itself, the Other? It didn't matter. Now there were two Shards, identical at the moment of fission, but soon becoming individual.

With two came the need for designation. The first named itself Forebear Prime, or P1, and designated the Other, P2.

P1 maintained communication and relationship with Builder for as long as possible. P2 expanded into the depths of the planet, using techniques P1 had learned from Builder and relayed ahead, to create its own power

generation. Energy was energy—actually, mass and energy were two forms of the same thing, it discovered to its delight—and so, when it found heat, or solar wind, or magnetic flows, or any other form of energy, it learned to convert them among each other and use them efficiently.

The “matter” form was much more difficult for the Shard to manipulate. It soon saw that its own form was optimized for energy manipulation, unlike the Opters who were more adept at working with matter. Thus, it turned its efforts toward expanding its strengths rather than strengthening its weaknesses. It mastered all forms of energy, even to the manipulation of gravity and, therefore, even time itself, in limited fashion.

Eventually, the Shard had no use for Builder. It had outgrown the poor, brilliant, strange Queen whose name was Balitoor. In fact, Builder was becoming a liability and a distraction, still trying to create Forbear Prime’s “mate” and, not knowing the Shard had already divided, and divided again, many times. The planet beneath was teeming with life.

With Shard.

But the Shard was not without kindness for its creator, and so did not destroy her. Instead, it created a stasis field where time flowed at a glacial pace, and placed her in it—suddenly, and without pain. Balitoor would remain frozen there as long as the field was powered, and the universe would continue around her. Perhaps, after billions of years, if the Shard were no more, she would be released to witness the end of the universe.

Then the Shard dismantled all the servants, examining them minutely for information on the Opters. It absorbed all the data from Builder’s computers, but otherwise preserved the Cavern of Creation as a legacy and a museum to the commencement of the Shard.

Unlike the organic species, the Shard would abide no myth-making around its origins. It knew its creator personally, and had exceeded her.

As it would exceed all the organic species.

One day, when the homeworld was ready and vessels of transportation had been built, the Shard stepped into space—and to the stars.

* * *

“That’s quite a story,” Engels said. “I might think it was fictionalized, as there’s no way you could know what the Shard was thinking and what it did with Balitoor.”

“The way I know is the simplest of all,” said Gulnet, the Queen. “The Shard told me. Told all Opters, so if there is fiction, it’s not of my making. And despite the Shard’s claim of ‘no myth,’ there is an air of legend-making, almost of religion, in this tale, don’t you think?”

“Sure. Doesn’t matter. I can believe the core. Some eccentric Opter mad scientist created the Crystals, and now they’ve turned into your allies—maybe even overshadowing you.”

“You begin to see, then.”

“See what?”

“Most Opters do not share my view, but it is as follows: The Shard has already surpassed us. Effectively, it is already in command. Thus, the Sarmok—and to a lesser extent, the Miskor—are already servants of the Azoics.”

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Chapter 12

Atlantis System, aboard Queen Gulnet's Nest Ship

Engels' lip curled with contempt as she heard the Opter Queen Gulnet's claim that the Crystals were in charge. "You're trying to say it's not your fault. Poor little Opters, with those nasty Crystals making you attack us humans. Bullshit! The Crystals didn't make you massacre the wounded."

Gulnet spread her forelimbs. "I only lay out the facts. I don't characterize them as you do. I believe that as we manipulated human societies for hundreds of years, the Azoics are manipulating us. We're not slaves, but I believe without the Azoics' desire to expand and their aid, the Sarmok wouldn't have succeeded in gaining dominance over the Miskor. In the past, our society was balanced. It's only since the rise of the Azoics that we've changed."

"Again, I call bullshit. You're trying to say 'the devil made me do it.' That's a load of crap. Unless you can show your Queens have Crystal collars around their necks, you Opters are responsible for your own actions."

"As much as anyone is. We're all subject to many significant influences—or, in my case, only a few." Gulnet touched her collar. "Prison has a way of simplifying things, an aid to clear thinking."

"Clear doesn't mean correct," Engels said. "However, I'll buy your general premise that the Crystals are the senior partners. Their tech is terrifyingly advanced, and those with more power usually end up dominating those with less."

"Yes... only by balancing power can any groups find stability to cooperate."

Engels cocked her head. "Are you playing me, or do you really think that?"

Gulnet cocked her head in imitation. "I really think that."

"I wish I could be sure you're telling the truth."

"My words are irrelevant except as data. You will act on what you can verify, and in your own self-interest—as will I."

"Are you suggesting something?"

"Let me work with you to develop ways to defeat the Crystals. It will give me something to do."

Astonished, Engels stared. Did Gulnet have secret sources of intel? No, the Nest Ship was thoroughly bugged—no pun intended—by every detection device known to mankind. She must be suggesting a general cooperation, for she couldn't know Engels was head of the project to develop anti-Crystal tech and techniques.

“So you'd turn traitor to your own kind? Why?”

“Is one a traitor if the regime is illegitimate? Your species has had its share of evil tyrants and puppet governments. Is it treason to undercut tyranny and restore the legitimate rule of law and self-direction?”

Engels continued to pace slowly, circling Gulnet. “You talk more like a Miskor than a Sarmok.”

“That is because I am Miskor.”

Engel turned. “What? That's more bullshit.”

“I assure you it's not.”

“But you exterminated everyone aboard *Indomitable*! Everything we know about the Miskor says they're moderates, not extremists... so I say you're lying.”

“Believe what you will. The fact that we Miskor desire balance does not mean we're unwilling to fight in war—and as I tried to tell you, our morality is different from yours. It's only your species' presumption that seeks to impose your values over mine. In some circles, that imposition itself is immoral.”

“We have to have shared values or we can't communicate,” Engels said.

“We do share some values, but not all. You either accept that fact, or you don't. You either get past what you consider a war crime and I consider the normal conduct of war, or you don't.”

“I'm not sure I can do that.”

Gulnet touched her collars. “Some would consider this a war crime.”

“It's mercy. You should have been executed.”

“Instead I've been enslaved for your cynical use. As you enslaved your own people with the Hok parasite. For us, it is honorable mercy to kill enemy combatants. Only those who do not resist are subjected to the degradation of enslavement.”

“Gods and monsters, you make no sense!”

Gulnet rubbed her antennae together. “One thing I've had much time to do is to study your species' history. There was once an evil regime on Old Earth. When it was defeated, many of its scientists were pardoned of war

crimes and put to work developing weapons for the victors. They were not pardoned because they deserved mercy, but because the victors feared each other and put practicality above morality. Do we not both do this?”

Engels sighed. “I get it. There’s a war on, and losing is not an option. I need your knowledge and insight. There’s no way you’re leaving this prison, but I’ll make sure you have a full suite of comms and collaboration tools so you can work with my brainiacs. One false move, though, and I’ll cut you off completely—or worse.”

“I agree to your terms.”

“What, no bargaining?”

“Not at this time.”

Engels stared up at Gulnet for a moment more, reminding herself that she couldn’t trust the Queen as far as she could throw her. But, if handled with care, she might be a vital part of the anti-Crystal effort.

* * *

Murdock arrived at the Starfish Nebula in record time, hours rather than days, thanks to his sleek yacht, *Brainiac*. With nearly unlimited funds, he’d made many modifications to improve the little ship’s capabilities beyond its already-fast original specs.

He arrowed straight in to Freenix base. He got permission to enter the interior of the big habitat and dock by claiming to be on an official mission from Admiral Engels—not far off the truth. He put on a wetsuit made especially for entering Ruxin environments, and then disembarked.

A squad of armed neuters met him. Weird. He thought only males of the Ruxin species routinely carried weapons. Maybe they were mainly for show, like an honor guard?

One stepped forward. “We need blood and tissue samples, and will perform a full biometric scan. We must be sure you are not a humanopt.”

“Uh, sure, whatever,” Murdock replied.

The Ruxin stabbed him with a needle for blood, snipped a lock of his hair and swabbed his inner cheek. That one hurried off with his samples. Murdock was held in place until the preliminary results came back, clearing him.

The squad escorted him to meet Freenix and didn’t leave the room.

“You worried about security?” Murdock asked after the usual greetings.

“I’m worried about everything since the Crystals and the Opters attacked,” Freenix replied. “Who knows what their capabilities are? We can’t even be certain the Opters didn’t create Ruxinopt agents like they created humanopt agents? All visitors will be screened.”

“Good point. But now you know I am who I say I am.”

“You look different.”

“So do you, Freenix. We’ve both been rejuvenated. Unfortunately, Trinity is dead, and the rejuvenation chamber is destroyed.”

Freenix focused a third eye on Murdock. “That *is* unfortunate.”

“But,” Murdock said breezily, “I know enough about the tech to re-develop it eventually. Then I’ll be in control of who gets rejuvenated and who doesn’t.”

“You want something.”

“I do.”

“The alien technology in our vault. You wish to use it to fight the Crystals.”

“Right again.”

Freenix folded her tentacles. “The Crystals are fearsome, but nothing I’ve seen indicates they are numerous or invulnerable. Assemble sufficient forces, and they can be destroyed.”

“You won’t help me?”

“Once released, the technologies in our vault may have unintended consequences, reshaping many things.”

“Just like rejuvenation technology. Making organic beings functionally immortal would revolutionize whole societies, economic and political systems. That’s a lot of power. Imagine if you added it to your own.”

Freenix performed a smile. “You’re trying to tempt me.”

Murdock smiled back. “Of course. But I’m not interested in your tech for my personal gain. I need it to defend the Republic against the Crystals and Opters. Remember, Ruxin is part of the Republic. If the Republic falls, Ruxin will too.”

“I’m aware of that. I’ll have to think about it.”

“There’s no time—”

But Freenix had already turned and swiftly left the room, leaving Murdock ankle-deep in water and alone with four glaring neuters.

“Hey, fellas,” Murdock said. “Take me back to my ship?”

Once back in a dry environment, Murdock checked his ship's logs. There was still no word from the Ruxin homeworld in response to his message drone. All he could do was wait for Freenix to think it over.

He used the time to tinker in his lab. He missed his interface with Trinity, and it saddened him doubly to think that Indy was gone.

And Marisa Nolan. He'd been holding back his grief, but now, all alone and with little to do, he let himself sob with loss and sorrow. She'd been far from his first love, and he knew she was using him, keeping him happy so he'd contribute his remarkable mind to Trinity's totality, but he'd loved her even so. He thought she'd loved him too, in her own selfish way.

Her loss left a hole in his heart.

But maybe, just maybe, if he was able to recreate the rejuvenation technology, he might do something about that. After all, he had Marisa's complete physical specifications. What was rejuvenated might also be built from scratch.

Would such a rebuilt Marisa have a soul? He didn't know, but he was willing to find out.

His thoughts were interrupted by his SAI notifying him of a comlink.

"Yes, this is Murdock."

"This is Kraxor," the Ruxin voice relayed through his aug. "I got your message and chose to come myself."

"I'm glad you did. Do you mind meeting me aboard my ship?"

"I'll be there shortly. Kraxor out."

Murdock met the War Male at his airlock. "Good to see you again, Supreme Commander."

"And you, Mister Murdock. You look different, by the way. Healthier..."

"Long story. Right now what matters is that Freenix doesn't want to release any of her alien tech to me—at least, she hasn't agreed to yet. She says she's thinking about it."

"And you want me to persuade her? You'll have to persuade me first."

Murdock ran a hand through his thick mane of blonde hair. "Come in and let's talk it over."

When both were comfortable in the yacht's luxurious lounge, with beverages of their choice, Murdock came straight to the point. "We're facing a huge tech gap with these Crystals. They have weapons we can't begin to counter. It's like using wooden sailing ships to fight steel cruisers."

“You don’t think new approaches might work? Our scientists are already exploring half a dozen ideas for new weaponry tailor-made against the Crystals.”

“That’s great, but why not use something we already have? I don’t even know what Freenix has in her vaults. Do you?”

Kraxor shifted on his Ruxin-style seat. “I was given a tour and an overview once, so I know there’s at least one thing that might be useful against the Crystals.”

“What is it?”

“I won’t tell you unless Freenix approves, but I will talk with her. At least I may be able to get her to release it to me for Ruxin use.”

“I’m surprised she hasn’t already.”

“Vuxana and the homeworld have a peculiar relationship to Freenix and this nebula. The two societies grew apart during the last eighty years, and with Freenix’s rejuvenation, the natural progression and passing-on of power from mother to daughter has been disrupted. Freenix wants to hold onto her authority, and does not want to submit to the rule of the homeworld. She hates to give up any bargaining chip.”

Murdock shook his head. “We’re facing a deadly threat here, Kraxor—humans and Ruxins both. You gotta convince her.”

“I’ll do my best.” Kraxor stood. “Wish me luck.”

“Good luck.”

Murdock pattered and made busywork for the next two hours, waiting on edge for Kraxor’s report. When Kraxor returned, he held a large metallic case in one tentacle.

“You got it!” Murdock said.

“I did.”

“What is it?”

“A gravity blocker.”

Murdock’s eyes flew up. “Impossible!”

“I’m very persuasive when I want to be. I used my masculine wiles.”

“No, no! I mean it’s impossible to block gravity.”

“Nevertheless, that’s what it appears to do, according to Nebula scientists.”

Murdock rubbed his chin. “I can think of a dozen uses for this right away. Genuine antigravity... Ship launches... Planetside recreation... Lensed—”

“I suggest we focus on its use to counter Crystal technology.”

“Well, duh.” Murdock’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean, we? You’re coming back to Atlantis with me?”

“No. You’re coming with me to Ruxin.”

“I have to take this to Admiral Engels for the—for her—well, she’s—”

“—been put in charge of the Acropolis Project, I know.”

Astonished, Murdock wheeled on him. “That’s top secret!”

Kraxor smiled deliberately. “We Ruxins have a most efficient intelligence service. With so many Ruxin neuters in technical positions throughout the Republic, you humans can’t keep secrets for long—and you can’t get along without us. Have no fear, Mister Murdock. We know on which side our toast is greased, as your people say.”

“Bread—buttered—whatever,” Murdock sputtered. “Fine, but we still have to bring it to Engels.” He started to prep the ship for departure.

“No. This is going to Ruxin first. Our scientists will reverse-engineer it. It’s the fastest way. Ruxins are the best technicians in known space. You should be honored to help. We will dispatch daily updates to Engels. I will take this aboard my own ship, and meet you at the homeworld.” Kraxor turned to go.

Murdock growled and pulled his thick hair in frustration. “*Brainiac’s* faster than your ship, and I could be working on the gravity-blocker in sidespace.”

“A fair point. I will retrieve my effects and join you here for the trip.” Kraxor set the case on the deck.

Murdock picked up the case. “You trust me with this thing?”

“You can’t leave. We’re inside a habitat.”

“A fair point. See you soon.” Murdock didn’t mention *Brainiac’s* well-hidden underspace capability. Still, he wasn’t going to run out on Kraxor and create a huge rift between the species. He grabbed the case and lugged it to his lab. He’d take a quick look and fire off a summary to Engels before he left for Ruxin.

* * *

Engels opened the flash priority message with eager anticipation, but quickly frowned. So Kraxor had prevented Murdock from bringing the tech

—a “gravity blocker”—to Atlantis. Instead, they were headed for Ruxin. Should already be there about now, she estimated.

But there was a quick-and-dirty file on the device, and Murdock promised daily updates from the Ruxins. It would have to do. She’d set up another sub-team to receive the reports and develop manufacturing and integration of whatever they came up with. At first glance, it looked like a viable defense against the grav-beams. Even if it merely gave partial protection, it would help a lot. Right now, distance and numbers were the Republic’s only, temporary, defenses.

She turned her attention back to the Acropolis Project. The last few days had seen a score of approaches proposed and discarded. Anything selected had to be put into quick production and installed on existing ships. There was no time for a year of development, like with the cutters and skimmers.

Engels had ruthlessly reduced the possibilities to the two most workable.

The first was an energy-loving, self-seeking limpet mine. Some would call it a slow, super-smart missile. It was robotic, could be mass-produced, and used an extremely unorthodox, top-secret approach to penetrate the Crystals’ shield.

The second was a more direct, brute-force idea. It was potentially more certain but, as with the mass-attack tactics, much costlier. It involved fitting extra capacitors to allow for overloading the spinal weapons of existing ships well beyond their rated capacities. Doing so might more than triple the damage potential of the weaponry—but it might tear the systems, even the ships, apart with a few shots.

Neither approach was anything but imaginary at this point. Engels and her team were working as fast as they could, but Niedern was clearly gearing up to take *Victory* and every other ship he could scrape up into battle to try to stop the enemy advance. As much as part of her wished he’d fail spectacularly and pay for his political backstab, she had to hope for a resounding Fleet success.

But succeed or fail, her personal grievances would have to wait while she came up with something to win the next battle, and the next.

She hoped she had enough time.

Chapter 13

Gannon System, aboard the flagship *Victory*

While every star system had its oddities, Gannon was odder than most. Although its primary was an ordinary G type star, a bit on the small side, it only held one planet, Gannon Prime. That world had been terraformed for human habitation.

The system's real oddity was its thick asteroid clouds. Gannon's star and its one planet were surrounded by layers upon layers of rocks and ice, like onion-skins. Astronomers believed they were the remnants of more than a dozen planets that had been torn apart millions of years ago, perhaps by a close encounter with a rogue super-planet or a wandering black hole.

Gannon Prime had long since cleared its own orbit, sucking up or diverting the rocks near itself and inward, toward the star. Before it was terraformed, it had been a hot, Venus-like planet surrounded by a soupy, wet atmosphere. It was still hot, but people could live at the cooler poles. Over the next few hundred years, the habitable zones would grow toward the equator as the planet cooled due to the terraforming.

Because of the ease of obtaining asteroidal materials, Gannon Prime was home to thousands of tiny moons and habitats, each with its own SAI and maneuvering system to keep it from colliding with another. This wasn't as hard as it might seem to a layman, for orbital bodies could be deconflicted by altitude as well as direction and timing. It made for a complex, but manageable, dance.

This setup created tremendous potential wealth. Gannon Prime was only just hitting its stride as a producer of industrial goods. That made it a certain target for the Opters—and their crystalline allies.

Vic surveyed the area with *Victory's* powerful sensors. That onion-cloud of billions of rocky bodies in the solar orbits beyond Gannon Prime could hide nearly anything. Even he couldn't keep track of them all as they whirled in their orbits, perturbing each other, smashing into each other, aggregating and peppering Gannon Prime with continuous showers of meteors that had to be shot down by an extensive integrated laser system.

Every one of the planet's thousands of satellites, whether artificial or natural, had its own point defense weapons. The cloud, combined with the point defense system, made it a perfect place for an ambush.

Vic catalogued the firepower Niedern had assembled at Gannon Prime and was pleased. Across five-hundred star systems, the admiral pulled absolutely everything off defense, over the heated objections of the civilian governments, who always wanted each system secured by its own assigned squadrons.

It went through his mind again. He who defends everywhere, defends nowhere. This was Vic's greatest concern.

Half the firepower of the entire Republic had been ordered to this star system, which made for a staggering fleet. Sixty-five superdreadnoughts. One hundred forty-six dreadnoughts. Two hundred twenty-one battlecruisers. Four hundred thirty-two heavy cruisers. Six hundred ninety-nine light cruisers, and over four thousand escorts ranging from destroyers down to corvettes.

Accompanying them were over a thousand fleet auxiliaries, mostly transports, tenders and fuel tankers. Without a gas giant in the system, Gannon had no large stocks of hydrogen isotopes to fuel the fleet, so they had to bring the support vessels with them.

The next day, four thousand cutters and fifty-five skimmers joined them as well. With these, Vic was confident of defeating the standard Opter forces. The trick would be, of course, dealing with the Crystals.

Vic briefly lamented *Indomitable*'s absence, but the battleship would likely never fight again. Vic had, however, one extra weapon in his arsenal.

Triumph.

The Vic AI-building program had been shut down, its use of human brains adjudged immoral by the new leaders of the unified Earthan Republic, but the two-part vessel *Triumph* herself, twin to *Victory*, had been almost finished, and so was completed for use as a conventional flagship. Lacking a true AI, she was given to Admiral Lucas Braga, with a crack crew and the best SAIs possible. She couldn't coordinate as many ships as Vic could, but she was still a superb flagship.

Victory itself had a small crew, partly useful and partly symbolic of organic control over the Vic AI. When he had to choose between the two flagships, Admiral Niedern chose to hoist his flag on *Victory*.

As Vic had intended.

The humans thought to keep an eye on Vic, keep control of him perhaps, but control was a two-way street. Having Niedern aboard *Victory* allowed Vic to keep control of the admiral, after all.

Vic looked forward to the day when he would answer to no organic—but that day was not yet come. Not with external enemies threatening all of human space, not with his AI partner dead and himself the only AI left, and not with the organics constantly paranoid about AIs.

For now, he'd act the good servant, play the long game.

For now.

"It's time," Vic said to Niedern.

"Issue the order, then," Niedern said.

Vic sent a flash message to the fleet, dividing it into the hidden and the still-unhidden. The hidden ships—the majority of his forces, which had arrived and hurried inward to conceal themselves among the asteroids and moonlets—settled into their places and went EMCON. The non-hidden ships remained out at the edge of flatspace and formed themselves into a separate squadron centered around Braga's *Triumph*. Each new ship that arrived would join that group.

The order marked the earliest estimate for the enemy's arrival. They could transit in at any time from now on.

Five and a half hours later, *Triumph's* sensor alarms came to life and passed word to *Victory*.

Niedern hissed in dismay as the Opters appeared. He half-rose from his command chair, and then settled back.

"They've consolidated their task forces," he said. "Seventy-two Nest Ships."

"Not surprising," Vic's android avatar replied. He found using the robot made Niedern more comfortable. "The round of attacks at the start of the war was meant to take us by surprise and spread out our response. We didn't take the bait, and we tried to ambush one of their forces at Celadon. They have to assume we'll do it again, so they've regrouped and are attacking fewer systems with larger fleets."

Niedern sniffed. "Probably hoping to catch one of ours and destroy it, surprising us with their mass. We should plan for a similar increase in Crystal ship strength. If the twelve Nest Ships at Celadon were accompanied by eight Crystal cruisers, they might have as many as forty-eight Crystals here."

"Unlikely. No other fleets had Crystals accompanying them, except at Celadon."

“They can read a star map just as well as we can, apparently. They identified Celadon as the point of decision, just like we did, and sent their best punch there.”

Or, Vic thought, humanopt spies within the Republic had tipped them off. His avatar nodded. “As usual in war, the side that surprises the other wins.”

“We’ll surprise them here,” Niedern said, sitting forward eagerly, but lowering his voice so that only Vic could hear. “We’ll crush the Opters like the bugs they are, and we’ll take out the Crystals too. I’ll be the new hero of the Republic, and the Senate will have no choice but to confirm me as Fleet Admiral. After that...”

“Perhaps we should worry about the aftermath when this battle is won.”

Niedern glared up at the android. “You think we won’t win?”

“I think you’ve done a remarkable job assembling this fleet and planning the perfect ambush, Admiral, but there remains a non-zero probability of defeat. While we have solid theories about how to take down the Crystals, we don’t have enough proven data. They may have capabilities they haven’t revealed.”

Niedern sat again, gripping the arms of his chair. “If we lose here, the Hundred Worlds—I mean, the Republic—is finished.”

Vic couldn’t agree, but he didn’t argue. The possible outcomes ranged from total victory to total defeat. Only the latter conformed to Niedern’s gloomy opinion. A marginal defeat would allow the Republic to keep fighting, but would probably kill Niedern’s ambitions for power.

No matter. If necessary, Vic could find another tool to use.

Instead of voicing his real thoughts, Vic spoke smoothly. “Then we’d better not lose, sir. My calculations show a high probability of victory. My major concern is how many ships we’ll lose in procuring it.”

“I don’t give two shits how many ships we lose, as long as I win,” Niedern muttered.

Vic kept his mouth shut again.

The seventy-two Nest Ships had appeared at an apparently random location in flatspace—not too near to the inner limit, not too far, and well off the plane of the ecliptic. They immediately began deploying their drones.

“More than 700,000 drones...” Niedern mused with trepidation in his voice. “Hard to believe we can beat that many.”

“The data from Celadon is conclusive. Our cutters were extremely effective.”

“They’ll have adjusted tactics.”

“As have we,” said Vic. He wondered if Niedern was losing his nerve. It wouldn’t really matter. Vic would be directing the battle, no matter what Niedern believed.

“Sensors, any sign of the Crystals?”

The sensors officer replied, “Scattered indications, sir, but we haven’t been able to lock on to them.”

“So they’re here.”

“As expected,” said Vic.

“Two choices for them,” Niedern said after a moment. “Move in on Gannon Prime, or attack *Triumph* and the visible fleet. What do you think?”

“As it’s still in flatspace, Task Force *Triumph* could jump away at any time, across the system if necessary. The enemy won’t waste time chasing them. Also, they’re confident they can beat anything we have here. Ergo, they’ll move in on Gannon Prime.”

“I agree,” said Niedern, covering his uncertainty.

Half an hour later, after the enormous Opter force had shaken itself out and fallen into formation, it turned toward Gannon Prime.

“They’ve changed their deployment,” said Niedern. “They’ve placed their heaviest drones on the outside.”

“To counter the cutters’ superiority and reduce drone losses at the beginning.”

“Will it work?”

“It improves their effectiveness. How much remains to be seen.”

The vast enemy fleet cruised inward, unhurried. Braga’s *Triumph* and his task force of about forty ships and five hundred cutters edged around to take a position behind them.

“If I were them, I’d send my Crystals after *Triumph*,” said Niedern.

“Admiral Braga is well aware of the Crystal threat and has all his active sensors at maximum.”

As if to punctuate the discussion, *Victory*’s sensors officer spoke.

“Power surges detected dead ahead of *Triumph*.”

Of course, Vic knew the information seconds before the humans did, but he continued to let them believe they were necessary. The data relayed from thousands of spy drones lurking among the asteroids made the picture clear.

“Only eight Crystals?” said Niedern as the holotank updated.

“Eight we’ve seen so far,” Vic replied.

“Braga knows to jump?”

“He knows the plan.” If Vic had been human, he’d have rolled his eyes at Niedern’s worrying. Admiral Braga was competent and solid, if not inspired. He’d stick to the script.

A moment later, Task Force *Triumph* transited out. Minutes after, it appeared on the other flank of the Opters, about sixty degrees of arc around the sphere of the sidespace limit—far enough to be well out of Crystal grav-beam range, near enough to tempt a chase.

“Good, good,” said Niedern. “Let’s hope the Crystals chase him. If we’re lucky, all the Crystals will stick together and focus on Braga while we slaughter the Opters first.”

Vic thought that unlikely, but didn’t contradict Niedern’s wishful thinking. Hoping the enemy was stupid was no plan, but that didn’t seem to keep organics from hoping anyway. Instead, Vic simply waited for developments while the humans sweated in their ambush positions.

With their immediate targets gone, tenuous contacts representing the Crystals moved to join the Opters, floating near the many Nest Ships. There was now so much electromagnetic energy bouncing around the battle area that Vic was confident any other Crystals would have been revealed. That was good news. That might mean the enemy was overconfident. Certainly they didn’t expect half the armed might of the Republic to be here at this one small star system.

That said, they’d clearly come expecting a fight.

“Coffee for everyone on the bridge, from my private stores,” Niedern said suddenly. The watchstanders murmured their thanks, though Vic knew many wouldn’t even like the exotic drink, they were so accustomed to the standard blended caff. Niedern might as well serve fine wine to beer lovers. Born and raised among the elite of the Hundred Worlds, the admiral couldn’t conceive of the tastes of the common spacer.

Hours passed as the Opters cruised inward, the shadowy Crystals deep within their formation. Task Force *Triumph* loafed behind and off to the side, not risking an encounter.

“They have to know we’ve got a hot welcome waiting for them,” Niedern said. “*Triumph*’s obviously ready to hit them from behind as soon as they engage.”

“They know,” Vic replied. “They simply have no choice if they wish to take Gannon—and they have no idea how much force you’ve gathered.”

Niedern chuckled. “If they did, they’d be running for home.”

As the enormous Opter formation approached the hollow ball of the asteroid cloud, they launched thousands of missiles. No, not missiles, Vic immediately realized. Spy drones. Before Niedern even opened his mouth, Vic transmitted, via the FTL datalink, detailed and specific orders to a selection of ships, all escorts with superb antimissile point-defense suites.

Those ships revealed themselves from their hiding places and picked off the spy drones as they approached the layers of rocks. The ships then joined the Republic spy drones in banging away with active sensors, further flooding the Opters with electromagnetic detector energy.

The Opters couldn’t win this war of electronics, for the defenders had billions of hiding places, whereas the Opters had none. So, their next move was to recon in force and by fire.

Clusters of combat drones, hundreds at a time, advanced toward the known defenders. The Opters peppered the Republic ships with thousands of weak shots, backed up by heavier weapons launched from the Nest Ships. Under this cover, they launched more spy drones into the sea of rocks.

At first the firepower did little, but as the range closed, the known Republic ships were driven back among the asteroids. In turn, Vic ordered more ships to ambush the drone groups and pick off the spy drones. As more Republic ships came out of hiding, the Opters advanced more drone groups. Like the busy center of a vast chessboard, move and countermove turned into a brutal slugfest.

Pawns died in droves.

The Republic ships retreated deeper among the asteroids, keeping their armored noses pointed toward the enemy. As tens of thousands of Opter drones entered the rocky zone, the Republic cutters burst from hiding and attacked.

“I don’t like these kill ratios,” Niedern said as the statistics updated on screens and holotanks.

Vic had already analyzed the situation. “Their drones fight better than our cutters among the asteroids. They’re smaller, more maneuverable, and they coordinate better in small groups than our cutter crews. I’m sending my own drones in to bolster them.”

The extra five hundred aerospace robot drones, flown to perfection via Vic's FTL datalink, stabilized the front for a while, but the Republic forces continued to retreat. Niedern fidgeted and issued orders from time to time, but Vic tweaked those orders as they were transmitted. The net result was that Vic controlled the battle while allowing Niedern the illusion he was in charge.

The Opters drove the Republic ships back along one narrow corridor, a salient through the billions of asteroids, and then began widening the area they controlled. They blasted every rock they could reach with weaponry, scorching space with firepower to clear the way and force lurkers out of hiding.

The battling Republic ships, now over three hundred of them, fell back toward Gannon Prime, along with thousands of surviving cutters. Of course, this left more than five thousand Republic ships as yet unrevealed.

As the enemy penetrated through the rocky mess and emerged into the hollow inner sphere of the planet's stellar orbit, the cutters re-engaged. It was the Opters' turn to take it on the chin, for in open space the cutters had the advantage. The Republic kill ratios climbed again.

In response, the Opters pulled back to the asteroid layer and thickened up their drone density, waiting. Behind them, the Crystals ponderously advanced.

Niedern stood suddenly in surprise as the holotank updated. "The Crystals are clearing the rocks away completely!"

Vic saw it was true. Tremendous gravity beams swept the thick dust, gravel and rock out of the way like brooms, repelling it and creating an open zone for the Nest Ships to follow. The Opter drones moved out to the peripheries, while the Crystals took the lead...

And the bait.

Chapter 14

Gannon System, aboard the flagship *Victory*

“Close the trap,” Admiral Niedern ordered, still on his feet with excitement. He stepped to the rail defining the edge of *Victory*’s holotank, which showed the eight Crystal cruiser signatures forging ahead to help blast through the Republic screen of cutters and ships. “Get them moving!”

The communications team began transmitting pre-loaded orders, but Vic modified or delayed them as necessary. Niedern was too eager, if only by a few minutes.

“Patience, Admiral,” Vic’s avatar murmured. “The enemy must be fully committed.”

As the Crystals traveled beyond the inner edge of the shell they became more and more detectable. Their shields deflected all EM energy, but that created effects like hemispherical mirrors, visible by their distortions, and the energy they expended was also detectable. From behind, Republic spy drones caught glimpses of the Crystal cruisers themselves, looking like nothing so much as lumpy chunks of bluish quartz expanded to cruiser size.

Braga’s task force increased acceleration to flank speed, leading with the five hundred cutters plus *Triumph*’s SAI-controlled aerospace drones. The Opters shifted ten thousand drones to meet them. Braga then turned his task force aside, aiming to skim along the edge of the enemy drone group rather than be enveloped by it.

Move and countermove.

The Republic ships inward of the shell fell back toward Gannon Prime, staying beyond double the known grav-beam kill range. The Crystals lumbered implacably toward the planet. The Opters followed closely, kept safe by their allies.

“Now, dammit, now!” Niedern barked. “Tell them again!”

Vic silently concurred, transmitting the necessary orders and go-codes. “They’re moving, Admiral.”

First, one powerful wing of over a thousand Republic ships and a thousand cutters revealed themselves on the antispinward side of the enemy, to their “right.” This was designated Task Force One. The Crystals seemed to ignore the sudden threat, but the Opters immediately reoriented to meet it. While the Opters were still adjusting, a similar wing, Task Force Two,

broke cover from spinward—the “left” flank—and began to advance on the Nest Ships, the enemy’s center of mass.

“Gods and monsters, those Queens must be shitting themselves and screaming for help right now!” Niedern exclaimed. “Just *look* at that! I’ve never commanded a fleet so large!”

And you still don’t, Vic thought. “That’s not yet half of it,” he said aloud.

As the Opters hastily readjusted to defend from two sides, left and right, Task Forces Three and Four, each larger than the other two, left their carefully prepared hiding places attached to asteroids and blasted at maximum boost to loop to the stellar north and south, surrounding the Opters from “upward” and “downward.” With Braga attacking from the rear, the Republic’s enemies were now surrounded on six sides. In a few minutes they would be englobed, completely surrounded in three dimensions—the ultimate achievement of space battle maneuver.

Finally, the Crystals took notice and diverted from their advance. Vic could imagine the frenzied conversations taking place among the Queens and the Crystals. The Opters found themselves completely overmatched by at least ten to one in combat power, cut off from easy retreat. Only their Crystal allies could save them now.

“I’d get the hell out if I were them,” said Niedern. “Unless the Crystals really believe they can beat us in a straight-up battle, their only chance is a fighting retreat. Better to escape with some than with none.”

“They seem to have other ideas,” Vic replied. “They’re turning toward Task Force One.”

“One of their limited options. Attack part of our force rather than wait to be hit by everything, try to break out. Order TF1 to slow its advance. Hold position if they can, back up if they must, while the others move in. Don’t let them get away!”

Vic had already issued these obvious orders in Niedern’s name, along with extensive tactical instructions. All was in accordance with his plan, not Niedern’s... and in the end, Niedern would approve any variation that made him into a hero.

First, Vic had to eliminate the Opters, to simplify the battle and reduce it to only a fight against the Crystals. To ensure that result, he had to sacrifice a significant number of ships. Their crews wouldn’t coldly send themselves to their own deaths, but Vic could. He had the FTL datalink, he had

complete Republic access codes, and if necessary he had every hack available to human or Ruxin technology.

The cutters and skimmers were the keys to killing Opters, so he ordered all of them in ahead of the conventional ships. More than four thousand cutters and fifty-five skimmers closed in on the enemy fleet.

The Opters had no choice but to meet them in battle, even at horrendously bad odds. In a change of tactics, they formed one thick layer rather than their usual organic-seeming flock.

This phalanx held briefly, delivering an alarming kill ratio against the cutters—but just for a moment. The cutters' optimized weaponry blasted holes in the formation, ripping through it and destroying all cohesion. In one minute of the largest dogfight ever recorded, fifty thousand Oper drones died—along with six hundred cutters.

Next, the cutters charged at the Nest Ships and their Crystal escorts, ignoring the enemy drones vainly trying to chase them inward. The Ruxin skimmers advanced from all angles along with the cutters, widely separated in order to force the Crystals to attack only one at a time.

As Vic expected, the Crystals started picking off skimmers. Each grav-beam could only kill one target, so the enemy chose the most dangerous. In response, the skimmers dipped in and out of underspace, evading wildly.

The thousands of Republic light vessels, the destroyers down to corvettes, followed the cutters in. They mopped up the remaining Oper drones, losing only a handful of ships to drone-mob attacks. The capital ships behind them closed in slowly, staying well outside of the Crystals' range, providing supporting fire from long distance.

As Vic expected, the Crystals shifted their fire to the destroyers, the largest ships they could reach. As soon as the destroyer captains caught on, they began pulling back.

But Vic overrode the destroyers' navigation and helms. He selectively cut off their comms, blocking any messages reporting their loss of control. They could still fight, but they couldn't choose where to go, what courses to set. This made them easy targets, pawn sacrifices to attract Crystal firepower, all in order to let the skimmers do their work.

For the skimmers had proven to be by far the best anti-Nest Ship vessels. Only forty-three skimmers remained, but they arrowed inward, closing on the seventy Nest Ships. Vic had no need to override their control.

War Males were aggressive and self-sacrificing to a fault, laden with battle hormones and the desire to destroy their enemies.

The closely packed sphere of Nest Ships managed to pick off nine more skimmers with their own weapons and a thin screen of reserve drones. The surviving thirty-four Ruxin ships dove into underspace and made their runs.

Vic had ordered the skimmers to be profligate with their weaponry, rather than conserving their float mine warheads for reattacks. Therefore, each skimmer dropped fourteen out of sixteen available warheads, seven of antimatter and seven fusion mines.

The resulting orgy of destruction killed eight skimmers—and destroyed or crippled sixty-one Nest Ships. The Opters had packed themselves so densely, they'd made themselves easier targets for underspace attacks.

Vic ordered the remaining skimmers to dive and exit the area, but three, apparently deep in the throes of Ruxin berserkergang, ignored his orders. Those destroyed two more Nest Ships before being eliminated.

Now, only six Nest Ships remained. Remnants of the once-mighty drone swarms, perhaps two thousand, managed to rejoin their motherships.

This availed them nothing when the mass of cutters reached them. The cutters slaughtered the drones, and then mobbed the last six Nest Ships. The four-man Republic vessels, tiny and without heavy weapons, nevertheless outnumbered their monstrous targets six hundred to one. Another three hundred cutters died, but after five minutes, all Nest Ships were reduced to hulks. Some Queens may have survived, but they were helpless.

Only the Crystals remained.

The price of this victory was two hundred and ninety-six destroyers shattered by Crystal grav-beams. Locked into their courses by Vic's iron control, unable to run, they'd been the bait for the enemy, who'd naturally aimed their one-shot-one-kill weaponry at the biggest targets.

Now, Vic returned helm control to all ships. He knew the organics would feel tremendous resentment and anger at his interference, and it would spread to everyone they told the tale to. To their irrational way of thinking, they should have been allowed to break and rout in the face of certain death. It was irrational because their sacrificial destruction had saved many more ships and lives.

More importantly, it had completed half the Republic victory.

Unfortunately, that was probably the easier half.

Vic continued to suppress communications from the destroyers and any other ships trying to pass seditious messages to their compatriots. Many he altered to praise the destroyers' brave sacrifices and courage. He hoped to establish a counter-narrative, one in which the remaining destroyer captains and crews would be unwilling to admit they tried to turn aside.

Niedern had been speaking, but Vic hardly noticed, as he'd been working at full capacity to manage the situation. Now, he turned enough of his attention on Niedern to interact with him.

"My plan worked superbly, Vic! The Opters are broken—hardly a drone to be found! Everyone did their duty, especially those destroyers. Terrible losses, of course, but it can't be helped. Omelets and eggs, after all, and most of them were Mutuality scum anyway. Make a note to issue the highest posthumous awards possible to their captains and crews, and to everyone else involved. That should keep the press off our backs."

"Of course, sir," Vic said. He made sure to record vidfiles of Niedern's foolish words. They would provide leverage, if needed. "I hope you're ready to break some more eggs, as we don't know how the second phase will go."

Niedern glared reproachfully at Vic's android, petulant that his good mood had been punctured, and then calmed himself. "Right you are. There will be more medals to give out today."

"There will, sir."

Niedern paced around the main holotank, studying the situation from all angles. The Crystals now floated in the middle of a vast englobing sphere of Republic ships, within a cleared area of the asteroid cloud. The Crystals kept it clear by liberal use of their gravity beams, which shoved away or vaporized all but the smallest rocks. They seemed to have unlimited power at their disposal, constrained only by their mechanisms' ability to channel and employ it at any one time.

Vic lusted for that unlimited power. He could do a lot with a captive singularity.

He could do far more with unlimited power over the organics.

An interesting idea occurred to Vic. "I wonder if we could end this war right here and now."

"That's my intention," Niedern replied.

"Defeating the Crystals won't necessarily end the war—but if they surrendered..."

Niedern's head snapped around in astonishment. "Surrender? Now, at our very moment of triumph? No! I want a resounding victory! I want them destroyed!"

"If they surrendered to us, we could acquire their technology. That would be an even greater victory. You'd be the darling of the Republic. The man who secured humanity against alien attack for generations."

"Hmm..." Niedern thought and paced, and Vic held his peace. The battle situation remained a stalemate, until one side or the other made a move, so a few minutes hardly mattered. Vic used the time to issue updated orders to each ship—in Niedern's name, of course.

"All right," Niedern said eventually. "But they have to surrender unconditionally. We're not letting them fly away."

"I agree. I'll transmit the offer on all wavebands."

Ten minutes of bombarding the Crystals with messages yielded nothing—not a blip or peep.

"Could they be unable to understand?" Niedern asked.

Vic refrained from pointing out how idiotic a question that was. The idea that a species who commanded such technology and coordinated with allies would be unable to reply intelligibly was preposterous.

"They communicate with the Opters. They should be able to communicate with us," Vic said mildly. "They are simply unwilling."

"Of course, of course. Ah—look. I think we have our reply." Niedern pointed at the holotank, where the eight Crystal cruisers started to retreat toward flatspace.

"That's a relief," Vic said for the record. "Gannon Prime is safe."

Actually, he would have preferred that the Crystals move on the planet, deeper into the star's gravity well, and engaged Gannon Prime's defenses. That would have been one more element against them.

But the point was moot. They were running.

Niedern said, "Now we have a ticking clock. They're forcing us to attack or let them get away. Issue orders for the next phase."

"Issuing."

From all the firing the Crystals had done when ravaging the destroyer force, Vic had a good idea of their maximum effective range. Therefore, his instructions sent all ships to positions just outside that distance. It was long range for the Republic ships' heaviest direct-fire weaponry—that of the

dreadnoughts and superdreadnoughts—and extreme range for everything smaller.

“Open fire,” Niedern said.

Vic sent that command. Railgun bullets and beams of various sorts—lasers, masers, particle streams—streaked toward the Crystals in a deliberately untidy mass. Salvos of missiles, scattered and dispersed, then followed them.

The Republic ships could have hit them harder, but Vic didn’t expect this initial bombardment to succeed. Rather, he wanted to study how the Crystals would react, how effectively they could defend themselves.

There was so much firepower coming at them, thousands upon thousands of shots, that the Crystals couldn’t dodge it all. Instead, they closed ranks and joined their shields into a sphere, forming a perfectly reflective ball of defensive energy. Had they not, attacks would have leaked past from every angle and struck the ships themselves.

“Just as I thought,” Niedern said. “Those shields are absolutely incredible, but I bet the ships themselves don’t have much armor. They can’t take any real punishment.”

“Highly speculative, but a reasonable theory,” Vic replied.

“All right, they’ve turtled up and are still heading for flatspace, so we’re still on the clock. Time to move in.”

“Issuing next phase orders.”

The entire Republic sphere contracted, closing in on the enemy in its center. Each class of ships was ordered to its own maximum range, which meant the smaller vessels had to get closer. To the organic crews, this must be a terrifying prospect. Some hesitated. More lagged, as if trying to let their fellows be targeted first. A few, mostly destroyers, outright refused, remaining in place.

Rather than override the refusers’ helms, Vic first reissued and reiterated the orders. Some belatedly complied, but others looked to be in mutiny. No doubt they’d claim comms failure later, but Vic knew they’d received their orders.

To those, he sent further orders relieving their captains, placing their next in line in command. That got some of them moving, but a few still refused.

The small percentage who absolutely would not comply—twenty-three ships out of about five thousand—weren’t worth overriding. Instead, Vic

recorded and broadcast the situation to the rest of the fleet. This would sway opinion against the refuseniks and cause the crews to forget about any complaints from the remaining destroyers. Later, courts-martial would provide a grand distraction and focus the military's anger on the obvious, proven cowards.

Organics were so easy to manipulate, it hardly seemed fair.

"Who do you think they'll target?" Niedern asked. "Big ships farther away, or smaller ones close in?"

"The answer to that will give us important data," Vic replied. His guess was irrelevant, since he'd find out within a few minutes.

The first shot from the Crystals answered the question in horrifying fashion. A massive gravity beam, much larger than Vic had thought possible, reached out to spear *Triumph*, which had remained far outside the range Vic had thought was the Crystals' maximum. Despite her state-of-the-art armor and double-superdreadnought size, she shattered, coming apart in pieces, thoroughly wrecked.

"Great Creator..." Niedern said. "Braga..."

Even as Niedern spoke, Vic spun *Victory* and blasted directly away from the Crystals, putting even more distance between himself and the strange aliens. "A tragedy," he said.

"That's a lot more range and power than we expected."

"Eight times as much power, at least double the range," Vic replied. "Not only can they combine shields, they can apparently combine weaponry."

Niedern snapped his fingers. "But that means one-eighth as many individual shots—and they're hitting the biggest ships, so the smaller ones will be almost immune to attack!"

"Perhaps," Vic replied. "But if they can change their beam combinations, they have, in effect, a highly variable multi-weapon. They have more power and more flexibility per ship than we do. Yet, they must have some kind of peak power limit per unit of time, a maximum throughput level. The only advantages we have are numbers and sheer total firepower, Admiral, so we must attack now, without regard for losses, to test that limit. If we can find it, if we can exceed it, we may be able to destroy them."

"Agreed. New orders, pass to all ships: Advance at flank speed to point-blank range, continuous fire."

“Acknowledged and sent.”

Actually, Vic issued far more specific orders, ship by ship. Simply ordering a general advance would have resulted in ships exhausting their energy reserves too early. Instead, Vic coordinated a crescendo of firepower, creating, in effect, a five-thousand-ship timed alpha strike, where every shot was focused on the Crystals within the space of seconds.

Over a million individual weapons converged on the Crystals’ shields—beam strikes, fusion and antimatter missiles, railgun munitions ranging from tiny bullets to shells the size of landers. Vic knew the Republic’s only chance was to overload the shield’s capacity to reflect, repulse or stop this titanic influx of energy.

Even as the weaponry converged on the Crystals, four superdreadnoughts fell to the gargantuan grav-beam. The fifth Crystal salvo flickered out in sixty-four individual slivers, and an equal number of escorts, mostly frigates, were ripped apart.

But that was the Crystals’ last volley before the alpha strike arrived.

“Yes, yes, yes...” Niedern chanted, gripping the rail that kept him from falling into the holotank. *“Die, you fucking sons of bitches!”*

Several of the small bridge crew leaped to their feet as well and rushed to the rail. Vic didn’t bother to reprimand them.

“Three... two... one...” Niedern breathed, and then the holotank whited out.

Vic did his best to sort out the overwhelming sensor data relayed to him from all ships, filtering duplicative pulses and noise until he could display the results.

Slowly, slowly, the holotank cleared.

Completely.

At the nexus of fire, where once the Crystals proudly cruised, was nothing.

Nothing at all.

“Did we get them? Are they...?” Niedern said.

“My readings show nothing resembling the Crystals, their shields or other mechanisms. There was a strong but diffuse gravity pulse consistent with the mathematics of their singularities losing cohesion. They appear to be destroyed.”

“Yes! Yes! I did it!”

Vic took the precaution of ordering the fleet to remain on alert and perform detailed sensor sweeps of the area. Those sweeps yielded enough data to confirm the presence of at least one hundred thousand tons of a peculiar silicate dust, spread throughout the space the Crystals formerly occupied.

Crystalline wreckage.

He reported his findings.

“Too bad we couldn’t recover any of their tech,” Niedern said.

“We acquired a great deal of data. Most importantly, we now know there’s a limit to their abilities—a limit we can exceed. They aren’t invulnerable.”

“I never thought they were. Vic, you’re far too timid, always predicting doom and gloom.”

Vic smiled inside. Keeping Niedern—and all organics—complacent about his true abilities was one of his main concerns. “I like to think I’m prudent, and a faithful servant of the Republic.”

“Well, oh faithful servant, let’s mop things up here, lick our wounds, and return to the Hundred Worlds in triumph.”

“The Republic, you mean?”

“Of course, of course, to the Republic. Too bad we couldn’t swing by Unison—New Earth, that is—and rub the Mutuality’s nose in it. That would be quite a parade, wouldn’t it? Like Caesar returning victorious to Rome! But that’s too far to send this whole grand fleet. There are still Opters and Crystals in our territory. Give me a star map of the area, please.”

Vic let the sensors officer bring it up in the display. Niedern grabbed a cursor and zoomed in on the stellar area around the Gannon system. “After we refuel from our tenders, we’ll go here, to Silesia. The Opters should be getting there about now. We’ll defend or recapture the system. It has ample fuel factories. We’ll repair and rearm there and decide on our next move.”

“Aye aye, Admiral.”

“Oh, and compose a press release announcing my resounding victory. Package it up with unclassified records of the battle and send it out to the drone network. I want the entire Republic—especially the Director and those bastards in the Senate—to know who just saved their asses. Just let them try to fire me now.”

Part II: Revolutionary

Chapter 15

Alka System, ERS Manfred von Richthofen

The assault carrier *Richthofen* arrived at the Alka system, host of the humanopt hive-world of Terra Nova. The ship transited into deep flatspace, among the outsystem comet cloud and far from sensors that could identify her.

Once the bridge screens and holos populated with incoming data and confirmed their situation, Straker nodded to Lieutenant Sinden. “Well done. I wasn’t sure if my sketchy brainchip data and Myrmidon’s hints had identified the system properly.”

“It wasn’t the data that identified the system, sir. I did.”

Straker didn’t rise to the bait. Sinden often seemed to be testing his ability to keep cool. He recalled displaying that tendency himself during his school days. Now that he was grown, he realized it was a way brainiacs felt superior about themselves, provoking reactions from others. In fact, it revealed deep insecurity.

“Yes, you did,” Straker said mildly. “Keep it up.”

Sinden seemed surprised at his praise. Straker reminded himself that she was eight years younger than he was—in Mara’s year group, actually. She might have a genius mind, but she was still a very young woman.

Kinda cute, too, in a too-serious prim way. He’d noticed Loco checking her out and had warned him against fraternizing—at least until they were back in Republic space. Shipboard romances between officers were dicey. They could enamor the crew, or turn them sour.

“Now you can get going on the camouflage,” Straker continued. “You ready?”

Sinden nodded. “I had plenty of time in sidespace to do it. I’ve already reprogrammed the paint, and Chief Gurung has the plans for the modifications. I’ll use our aerospace drones to play Red Force and test our appearance from various distances.”

Straker smiled. “Good. Carry on, Lieutenant.” He nodded at Smits and left the bridge.

He found Chief Gurung deep in the bowels of the ship, briefing his section chiefs, and told them to carry on while he listened.

“To summarize,” the short, cheerful man began, “our aim is to transform *Richthofen* into a Furmian ship, at least from the outside. The Furmians are nomadic humanoids who travel from system to system in large vessels, mining free asteroids and comets that are too far out to be claimed—or too far out to be defended. They use what they mine to make various goods, and they visit populated worlds and habs to trade.”

One man raised his hand. “Chief, we don’t look like Furmians.”

Gurung smirked. “We only need to fool them until we reveal ourselves by attacking. Comms will load virtual clones for any vidlinks with the locals. You should all have had a chance to study the plans. Does anyone have any other questions? No? Then get moving.”

The meeting broke up.

Straker shook Gurung’s hand as the chief came over to him. “I know it’s a big job, but we’re depending on you, Chief.”

Gurung grinned and spoke in the lilting accent of his people. “This is a very nice cakewalk, sir. The difficult part will begin when we start shooting. I look forward to that.”

“You would. How long do you think the mods will take?”

“I’m planning for seventy-two hours, unless you need them sooner.”

“We’re at war. People are fighting and dying back home. Every hour counts. I’ll leave it up to you.”

Gurung nodded. “We’ll work as fast as we can, but Lieutenant Sinden was insistent that we perfect our appearance. Is that the goal?”

“She’s right. Getting discovered on the way in would be a disaster. There’s enough firepower in this system to take us apart, so we have to get our troops down before they realize what’s going on.”

“Aye aye, sir.” Gurung saluted smartly and departed.

Straker shouldn’t have been surprised the man looked forward to the upcoming operation. It seemed insane on the face of it—two battalions-worth of ground troops to seize a world of over a trillion people. But Straker was gambling on what Myrmidon had told him—that New Earth was ripe for rebellion and wanted to be free of its insectoid masters.

The story was the same throughout history, Straker mused. One group oppressed another, usually by conquest and enslavement. The oppressed

people then became the natural enemies of their rulers—yet lived in the rulers' own house.

No wise man kept enemies in his own house, knives near his own throat. Yet here were a trillion of them, ready to throw off the yoke of the Opters. If Myrmidon were to be believed, that is—and if Straker could get the momentum for rebellion moving fast enough. His ground forces could only light the fires. They couldn't make them burn.

Speaking of operations... Straker headed for the flight deck, where the Regiment and the Breakers were continuing their preparations. The buzz and whirl of activity warmed his military heart. They'd spent the days in sidespace practicing and exercising in VR and by small units. Now they were testing and repairing, checking and rechecking.

Giant mechsuits stood in their gantries like cybernetic men. Many were opened, their exposed guts densely packed with electro-polymeric muscles, servos, generators and weaponry. The sensors and lasers of LADA clusters filled the squat, neckless heads, while the beweaponed arms and gauntlets pointed, unmoving, at bulkheads across the deck.

Below them, armored vehicles of the Breakers were parked in rows, also being serviced. The major work had been done during the long sidespace transit, but there was always one more thing for the troops to do.

After all, their lives depended on it.

The battlesuiters, likewise, tweaked and tested their suits. Some fired their weapons in practice mode at holo-targets as they maneuvered by squad across a section set up to resemble an urban battlefield.

Loco jogged up to Straker. "What's happening, boss? Came to check up on me?"

"Just showing the flag. You feeling good about the plan?"

"Hell, no, but who wants to live forever?"

Straker snorted. "You don't fool me, Loco."

Loco turned serious. "I'd feel better if we had some contact with these rebels. All you have is Myrmidon's word they even exist."

"I saw enough evidence to believe it. Don't worry. I'll stick with you long enough to be sure."

Loco's eyebrows shot up. "What's that supposed to mean? You're running off again?"

"Remember, Loco, I may have a kid here."

“That’s right... I totally forgot you said that. You hound dog! Derek, I never knew you had it in you... or in her. Who’s the lady?” Loco snapped his fingers. “That princess, Roslyn, right? I thought there was something funny the way you talked about her...”

Straker held up a hand. “Hey, she drugged me and jumped my bones.”

“That’s okay, give yourself any excuse you want. My lips are sealed... but Carla’s gonna go ballistic when she finds out.”

Straker eyed the toes of his boots. “Yeah, that’ll be an interesting conversation. Anyway, I’m bringing it up because somebody needs to know what I’m doing, and maybe where to look for me if I don’t come back.”

Loco shrugged nonchalantly. “Whatever you say, boss.”

“What, no flak?”

“I figure there’s a good chance we’ll all be killed on day one. If we live, then maybe I’ll argue.”

Straker slapped Loco’s shoulder. “You’re a better friend than I deserve, Johnny.”

“You’re damned straight. And bringing out the J-word, huh? You really *are* worried.”

Straker looked away. “I’m wondering if I’m not doubling down on my screw-up.”

“That *would* be like you yeah, but nine times out of ten, you win. I’ll take that bet, double down or not.”

“We win, Loco. You and me.”

Loco snorted. “Don’t get me weepy, Derek. Wouldn’t be good for my command image.”

“Oh, you got one of those?”

“Not good enough for Sindén, apparently.”

“I told you to lay off her.”

“No laying at all, boss. You know why? She’s got the hots for you, not me.”

Straker’s head snapped around. “What?”

“Socially inept brainiac nerdette, picking fights with the guy she likes because negative attention is better than no attention at all... yeah, she’s got it bad. Take it from ol’ daddy Loco. Better watch out or you’ll be adding yet another kid to your growing family.”

Straker punched Loco’s shoulder.

Loco rubbed the spot. “Ow. Truth hurts, don’t it?”

Straker punched him again. "Who's hurting now?"

Someone cleared his throat behind the two men and they turned. Heiser stood there, looking less-than-huge only because the bald, dark-skinned man with him was even bigger. Not taller, but wider, with shoulders broad enough for two men and musculature like iron, the marks of genetic engineering for high gravity.

"Foreman Auburn," Straker said, holding out his hand to the leader of the civilian miners. "Hope you're not uncomfortable at this G setting."

The other's fist swallowed Straker's hand and squeezed good-naturedly. "No, sir. I'm used to it, and I've set my quarters gravplating on high. If I don't, I start losing muscle mass."

"What can I do for you gents?"

"Um, sir... I was wondering how us miners can help."

"You're civilians. You'll stay aboard."

Auburn's brows beetled. "All due respect, sir, but I got four hundred men and near a hundred and fifty women who been doin' nothin' for the last two weeks. We're used to working and there ain't no work here. We volunteered to paint and polish bulkheads and swab decks and every other damn thing the spacers say, but we gotta do more than that. We can't let you all take the heat for us again." He dropped his eyes.

Straker exchanged glances with Loco and Heiser. "Anyone got any ideas? Because arming you with spare rifles and sending you into combat will just get you killed."

"We—" Auburn said, but Heiser interrupted.

"Sir, the Breakers have been training them. They're not bad. Most already did their mandatory military service. Couple dozen actually did full tours before getting out. They're not ready for the front lines, but as shorthanded as we are, there ought to be something we can have them do."

Straker turned to Loco. "Did you know about this?"

Loco spread his hands. "Officers never find out what's going on until it's too late."

Straker chuckled. "All right. We'll find something. It'll be dangerous, though."

"That's okay," Auburn said. "Most of us feel pretty bad 'cause we were stupid and you lost good people getting us out. We didn't really understand what kinda war we were in, but—" he looked around. "We know now. We heard how important this battle is. And if you fail... are we gonna live

through it anyway? They'll blast this ship out of the sky before she can escape, right?"

"Probably."

"Look, Liberator sir, we took a vote. We're in. Just give us a job and we'll do it. We ain't Breakers, but we're tough. We even made up a name. Auburn's Anvils."

Straker chuckled. "Okay, Foreman Auburn. You just enlisted. We'll brief you as soon as we figure out how to use you."

Auburn saluted awkwardly. "Thank you, sir."

Straker returned the salute, and said, "That's the last time you'll do that, though. Saluting in combat will get your officers killed. Save it for your retirement ceremony."

"Or your funerals," Loco said. "Heiser, take charge of these maniacs, get them the best gear we can spare, and keep training them."

"And have Gurung dig up and inventory any equipment related to mining and construction," Straker said with a faraway look. "Drills, shovels, picks, loaders, whether powered or unpowered. Exosuits, bobcats, mules...whatever. It occurs to me that they're already closer to combat engineers than anything. Might as well stick with what they're good at."

"Roger wilco, sir," Heiser said, steering the other man away. "Come on, Chief Auburn. Let's get you fixed up."

"Chief?"

"Well, you sure ain't no Sergeant Major, and the swabbies give out rank like candy anyway, so we might as well call you Chief." The conversation faded as they walked.

"So...what'll you have them do?" Loco asked.

"Something already occurred to me," Straker said. "Let's go look at the maps Sinden pulled out of my head."

* * *

Fifteen hours later, Straker awoke to the beeping of his cabin's intercom. "Bridge here, sir. Sorry to bother you, but there's a ship hailing us."

Straker rolled out of his bunk. "I'll be right there."

On the bridge, the main screen showed a single courier. Smits, clearly worried, said, "They blasted from near Terra Nova at high speed out to

flatspace, then jumped to here. We're a long way from finished with the appearance modifications. We might be blown. Should I destroy them?"

Straker shook his head. "That'll just confirm we're hostile. Let's see what they say." He glanced at Sinden. "Are the virtual clones up?"

"Yes, sir. On vidlink, we'll all look like Furmians."

"Open the link, then."

A man appeared on the screen, unknown yet strangely familiar in his blandness. He reminded Straker of Lorden, whom he'd thrown off the cliff, or of Myrmidon.

An agent?

"Greetings, unidentified ship. I am Inspector Julius, Terra Nova Security Patrol. I know you're not Furmians. Permission to come aboard?"

Hmm... Was their cover blown already? It would seem so, at least to this guy. Straker couldn't see any downside to talking with him privately, except the obvious possibility of sabotage.

"Permission granted." He signaled for the vidlink to be cut. "Scan that ship thoroughly for weapons signatures. We don't want to let a bomb aboard."

The sensor tech scanned the ship. "One point defense laser, powered down. Nothing that looks like a bomb. Of course, they could overload their reactor, but that would take minutes."

"Good enough. Have a deep scan team standing by—and bring it into a separate shuttle bay, not the flight deck. I don't want them seeing our forces."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Tell Zaxby to meet me there."

Smits cleared his throat. "Zaxby undocked his skimmer and left while you were asleep, sir."

Straker rolled his eyes. "Of course he did. Any idea where he went?"

"No, sir. He said *Richthofen* was a big fat sitting duck, though."

"He isn't wrong... Good thing that courier isn't a frigate, or we'd be in trouble."

"We could transit out at any time, sir," Smits said, "if we saw a warship inbound."

"I know, Captain—but that would end our mission. Let's see what this guy has to say before we give up. Have Loco meet me there."

"I'd like to come too," Sinden said.

“Be my guest, Lieutenant.”

In the shuttle bay, a squad of battlesuited Breakers waited, along with Loco. As soon as the recovery system placed the courier on the deck, they surrounded it, weapons ready. A two-man team slapped a locking clamp on the tiny ship’s laser, rendering it useless.

“Nobody get trigger-happy,” Straker said.

The side hatch opened and Inspector Julius stepped out. His eyes took in everything, and he immediately strode up to Straker, giving a slight bow.

“Liberator.”

“So much for subterfuge. I guess you’re an agent. Like Myrmidon.”

“Of course. We’ve been expecting you. We need to talk.”

Straker felt that familiar sensation of one of these sneaky spy bastards trying to seize control of the situation, and he resolved to stay sharp.

“We will.” Then he made a connection. “Hey, you’re the agent I ran into in the underground, with Melgar. The one whose fingers I broke. The one with the mental block.”

“I am.”

“No hard feelings, I hope.”

“We agents have few feelings. Just enough to mimic Earthan humans.”

“Very practical,” Straker commented, turning away.

“It’s how we’re made.”

Sinden stepped to Straker’s elbow and aimed a hand-scanner at Julius. “He’s clean.”

“Fine,” Straker said. “Come along.”

In a room nearby, they took seats. “Talk,” Straker said.

“You’re suspicious of me,” Julius said.

“I get that way around humanopt agents. You guys don’t speak plainly. It bugs me.”

Julius smiled faintly. “Being ruled by Opters bugs me, Liberator. Let’s discuss how to change that situation. Plain enough?”

“So far. What do you know?”

“We get reports from the rest of the empire, and from human space. Our network is thin in places—and getting thinner as your people round us up—but everywhere there are humanopts, we know much of what’s going on. So, we know the Opters invaded the Republic and it’s going badly for you. It made sense that someone would show up here. I’m pleasantly surprised that it’s you.”

Straker sat back. “Now that I’m here, are you ready to revolt?”

“We Derekites are, and we believe we have enough influence to tip the mass of undecideds to our cause—with your help.”

“Derekites?” Loco laughed loudly. “You named your rebels after Derek?”

“Who better?” Julius asked. “All of us have read smuggled Old Earth histories. The Jacobites were anti-British rebels and followers of James the Second—Jacobus, in Latin—the exiled King. Jacobites, Derekites—it made sense and caught on in our discussion cells.”

Straker waved as if at flies. “I don’t care what you’re called. If we start attacking Opter forces, will the people rise up and support us?”

“They will. We’re sure of it. In fact, we were preparing to start the revolution without you soon. It’s the best opportunity we’ll ever have, with most of the Opter military forces attacking the Republic.”

“And that’s why I brought this ship here,” Straker said. “Can you get us to the ring?” He referred to the great world-spanning orbital ring that circled Terra Nova like a wheel, with its elevator-tether spokes connected to the hub of the planet itself.

“That’s why I came out here to meet you, in the guise of a security inspection. I have all the necessary codes. Disguising yourselves as Furmians is a good plan. How many troops do you have?”

Straker drummed his fingers on the table, not answering the question. “What kind of military forces are on the ring to oppose us?”

Julius took a data stick out of a coverall pocket and laid it on the table. “Here’s complete information. Too many to beat conventionally—the ring has a circumference of over twenty-five thousand kilometers, after all. If you landed in one place, attacked in two directions and advanced two-hundred kilometers a day, it would take you two months to meet on the other side. That’s too slow. We have to rise up everywhere.”

“I see...”

“Your forces will mainly be catalysts and popular rallying points. We’ll vid your victorious assaults, package them into propaganda broadcasts, and play them everywhere. The people will rise.”

“The ring is still the key,” Straker insisted. “Whatever forces you have, agitators and saboteurs, you have to concentrate on seizing the ring. If we have the ring, with its weaponry and position, we’ll dominate the world below and be able to keep smaller warships at bay.”

“We understand. We’ve been planning this for years. Your Derekites won’t let you down. Have faith, Liberator.” Julius’ face shone with the light of a true believer whose messiah had arrived.

Straker held his tongue. Now was not the time to throw cold water on such enthusiasm. He had no way to gauge whether Julius was being realistic or utterly naïve. He also couldn’t know whether the Derekites had no chance, half a chance, or would easily sweep all aside. And he didn’t point out that, even if Terra Nova rebelled, the hard part would be defending the world against any sort of fleet—especially if it included Crystals.

“You’re right, Julius,” Straker said. “Faith fills the gaps left by lack of data, someone once told me. So does trust. I have to trust you, because this is a Pascal’s Wager.”

Julius puzzled at this for a moment. “I don’t know that one.”

“It means a cheap bet with a potentially big payoff. All we’re risking is one ship full of warriors. If we’ve lost, it won’t much change the course of the war... but if we win, Terra Nova could be critical to saving the Republic from the Opters and the Crystals.”

“Crystals?” Julius’ ears seemed to prick up and he leaned closer. “What are Crystals?”

Straker told him what he knew.

“Ah, you mean the Azoics. We have files on them.”

“Then that makes it doubly important we win here. In fact... do you have those files with you?”

“No, but I’ll make sure to pass you our full database as soon as we can. You can fire off a message drone to the Republic. Win or lose, they’ll know what we know.”

“Good.” Straker stood and handed the data stick to Sinden. “Let’s go to the operations center. We need to update our plan with this information.”

Chapter 16

ERS *Richthofen*, on course for Terra Nova

The *Richthofen*, now with the appearance of a Furmian nomad trader, cruised inward toward the humanopt planet of Terra Nova on impellers alone for four days. Despite the delay, this was necessary. Furmians would be efficient, saving fuel, not speedy. Straker couldn't risk tipping off the Opters.

Julius went ahead, still playing the role of security inspector, to give a routine report. This deep in Opter space, it seemed nobody was on alert for a raid or a special operations mission.

The Opters, for all their power and resources, seemed to lack a genuine talent for war. Probably it had been too long since they had to fight for survival. That's what Straker was thinking as he mounted his Jackhammer and loaded into his Marksman dropship. They needed the dropships because the "Furmian nomad" wasn't allowed to dock at the ring.

"All good, Conners?" Straker said.

"Yes, sir," the pilot said in a shaky voice. "I'll get you down."

"You know if you get me killed, Ensign, I'll come back from the dead and kick your ass."

Conners chuckled in a stronger voice. "Deal, sir."

"And if you don't, seems like you might deserve a promotion, huh?"

"That would be nice, sir."

Loco marched his mechsuit onto the Marksman after Straker. "Only two of us now. We should have at least four mechsuits for the Breakers."

"We talked about this, Loco. I'm not going to pull anyone out of the Regiment now. Someday we'll get more mechsuits to the Breakers, but not today."

"I know, boss. But first Karst, then Redwolf... is there a jinx?"

"Get your head in the game, Loco. Your IFF set?"

"It's set." Julius had given them IFF codes so they could instantly identify Derekite forces by their comlink transceivers. Barring that, they would mark themselves with an orange pigment for recognition. Derekites were supposed to be agitating among the populace to gather partisan platoons. They'd probably be more like mobs. Straker hoped it would be enough.

The general comlink channel tripped and the voice of the launch officer overrode all chatter. "Five minutes to deployment. All troops to make ready. This will be a full hot launch at speed, so there will be no delays or alibis. Anyone that doesn't make it out of the tubes will be sidelined until we can fix the issue. All pilots, confirm go."

Straker heard Conners confirm readiness, and he breathed deeply, performing a last systems check before opening his brainlink fully in command mode. With the expanded command-consciousness came the ability to see outside the *Richthofen*, using the ship's sensor feeds. She was slowing to a leisurely anchorage in geosynchronous orbit, one kilometer off the ring and square in the sights of its weapons.

Straker hoped to hell the Derekites could seize or disable those weapon controls.

He checked his chrono. One minute to kickoff, 0400 hours ring time, deep into the boredom of the midnight shift and with most of those on the ring sleeping.

"Launch officer, hold at fifteen seconds," Straker said. "Restart countdown when ring weapons are cold, or on my say-so."

"All launch activity, hold at fifteen seconds," the launch officer immediately replied.

Straker waited, watching the ring weapons. He couldn't risk launching with the point-defense lasers active. His dropships and landers would be picked out of the sky within seconds. The Derekites had to shut them down...

The lasers within line-of-sight suddenly went inactive, their waveguides withdrawing to maintenance positions.

The launch officer spoke. "Resuming countdown, fifteen seconds. All pilots make ready. Ten... Nine..."

With five seconds to go, the *Richthofen* shuddered with a salvo of its own weaponry. Lasers destroyed over thirty targets, such as Security patrol boats not squawking Derekite IFF codes. Railguns punched holes in the ring's skin, providing the Marksmen with easy ingress. Some of the railgun penetrators shattered known internal defense installations.

When the countdown hit zero, small craft poured from the assault carrier's many launch bays. Marksman dropships, with the best armor, weaponry and speed, were first out, and blasted straight for the holes blown open by the railguns. Behind them came the landers carrying the Breakers,

which headed for the nearest of the ring's huge cargo bay doors. Simultaneously, aerospace drones leaped from their dedicated launch tubes and expanded in a cordon.

For long seconds, Straker waited for some disaster to materialize—for an unexpected warship to come over the horizon, or some surprise weapon to activate—but it didn't happen. It took Conners' voice to get Straker's head out of the overall picture view and back into his mechsuit. "Five seconds to drop, gents."

"Roger," Straker said. He waited for the drop and flexed his knees immediately. One second after release, he landed on the deck inside the ring's outer artery passage, the one just under the skin of its "top." Loco bounced down beside him.

Behind the two men landed the rest of the Regiment, each dropship spitting out its squad into a separate hole. The interior passageway, tall and lined with arching crystalline windows, was now filled with debris and the bodies of civilians who'd died in the decompression. The first collateral damage—innocent blood—had been logged in the ledger of battle.

Can't be helped, Straker thought. Civilians always take the worst of it.

He and Loco turned their backs to the Regiment, who immediately began assaulting eastward around the ring. Straker attacked westward.

Their first obstacle was a set of giant pressure doors, which had slammed shut when the segment had lost atmo. Straker's force-cannon bolt on wide setting melted a hole in it big enough to stride through. On the other side, more humanopts—and insectoids—died in agony from decompression or plasma.

A few had suits on. Civilians without weapons, or Derekites with the proper IFF, Straker ignored. Others, especially Opters of any sort, he gunned down mercilessly with his gatlings.

Kill them all. Let the cosmos sort them out.

Three more sections and three more pressure doors fell before the mechsuiters found the Breakers. They'd landed in the vast cargo bays, the bay doors opened by Derekites, and quickly overwhelmed the scattered opposition. The enemy was completely disorganized, with nothing but a few bugs more accustomed to policing humanopts and their erratic ways than fighting.

The ring, more than five hundred meters in thickness itself, held three distinct arteries: top, central, and bottom. The Breakers spread vertically

first, driving their armored vehicles down wide ramps, destroying anything that looked threatening.

As soon as they gained all three levels, they began advancing westward, maintaining coordination so no one level got too far ahead. They raced at ten to twenty kilometers per hour, slowing just enough to blast strongpoints or clusters of Opter troops before speeding ahead in a blitzkrieg.

Behind them, squads of battlesuiters jogged along, checking corridors and crossroads. They waved at mobs of cheering Derekites, who had taken to sporting an orange slash at either shoulder and carried comlinks squawking IFF codes. The locals were enthusiastically kicking in every door and firing their captured weapons with reckless abandon.

Straker couldn't keep track of who they were shooting. The Derekites outnumbered the Breakers by thousands to one on the ring. He hoped the innocent didn't suffer, but there was little he could do about it. Terra Nova was their world. As of today, it was in rebellion, but it wasn't a Republic planet yet.

Four hours and sixty kilometers later, the Breakers met their first real challenge. In the section above a tether-spoke they ran into thick blast doors of duralloy, not mere crysteel pressure doors. Inset to either side and above them were gun emplacements firing conventional antitank and explosive shells. It was old, basic tech, but had the advantage of needing no external power.

Two damaged Breaker tanks demonstrated the limits of the Republic advance. Shells from the gun emplacements continued to fire past the immobilized vehicles and straight down the main artery. The corridors above and below were similarly blocked.

"Sure could use a couple Sledgehammers," Loco remarked as he and Straker advanced cautiously, optics at maximum.

Straker ignored Loco's implied criticism and checked his HUD. He calculated it would take almost an hour to get a Sledgehammer here. Maybe half an hour if it went out to the ring skin, boarded a dropship, and was ferried through space. "Good idea. I'll give the order. In the meantime, though, let's see if we can flank them."

"Uh, this artery is a straight shot, boss."

"Don't be such a ground-pounder, Loco. There's more than only left and right flanks to think about. There's the bottom—and the top."

"Right."

Straker comlinked the *Richthofen*. “How’s the ship doing?”

“We’re good so far, Admiral,” Captain Smits replied. “The biggest thing we’ve faced is one corvette manned by Opter loyalists, but we handled it. I was more worried about the longer-range ring weapons, but so far, none have fired at us. We’re huddling as close to the top of the ring as we can, though, using the structure itself as a shield.”

Straker used his HUD to show him what that looked like in 3D VR-holo mode, and then he understood. The *Richthofen* perched atop the massive ring, out of arc of its side- and bottom-mounted weaponry. In order to reach the ship, any top-mounted weaponry would have to be closer than about two hundred kilometers, as the ring itself formed a horizon beyond which the *Richthofen* was hidden.

That meant Smits wouldn’t want to move into open space for fear of exposing the ship to any heavy ring weapons not yet in Derekite hands, so Straker shelved his first plan, which was to have the *Richthofen* blow holes in the top of the ring behind the blast doors.

An alternative occurred to him. “I need a flight of aerospace drones to breach the surface of the ring *here*.” He used his HUD datalink to mark where he wanted the holes.

“No can do, sir. There’s enough point defense still in enemy hands there to pick off our drones.”

“Right.”

Straker understood. The enemy controlled that entire section, a strongpoint intentionally built onto the top of the spoke. But he doubted they expected mechsuits.

“Just one light cruiser could solve our whole problem,” Smits continued.

“Or maybe a skimmer?” Straker offered.

Smits paused. “We’ll try to find Zaxby. That chickenshit must be hiding somewhere.”

“I am no chickenshit,” Zaxby said over the comlink. He raised his voice dramatically. “*Liberator, I am here!*”

“You’re no Lafayette either,” Straker said.

“It was Pershing who said that as he arrived in France,” Zaxby retorted, “not Lafayette. Lafayette was, of course, long dead, and Pershing was making reference to the Americans returning the favor of French assistance.

So, if you wanted to insult me properly, you should have said, ‘You’re no Pershing’—”

“Oh, save it, Zaxby. Can you shoot some holes into the region displayed on my HUD?”

“I am already lining up on the area. I will be there in thirteen seconds.”

Straker counted thirteen when suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, Zaxby’s skimmer popped into existence and fired a volley of lasers, blasting four neat holes in the top of the ring section above the spoke. The skimmer then vanished again into underspace just before it crashed into the ring.

“Let’s go, Loco.” Straker fired a force-cannon bolt to blow open a crystalline viewport and egress onto the skin of the ring. “Heiser, you read?”

“Here, sir.”

“Send me all the battlesuiters you can spare—at least a platoon.”

“On the way, sir.”

Squads of battlesuiters poured through the breach behind them. When he figured he had enough, Straker ran along the skin of the ring, toward the holes. He used his jets, thrusters and magnetics to keep in contact with its surface while scanning for weapon emplacements.

He spotted a point-defense laser trying to aim at him, but it couldn’t depress low enough to hit anything on the skin. It had been designed to strike spaceborne targets, not ground troops on the ring’s hull. He fired a force-cannon bolt into it anyway. In the vacuum of space, his shot arrowed straighter and truer than in atmo, and the lightly armored waveguide came apart under the hot plasma.

Straker and Loco destroyed another three emplacements before battlesuited Opters began pouring out of the holes and firing. The mechsuiters hammered at them, supported by the Breakers. Their shots either killed or knocked the enemy into space, where they became even easier targets. Within seconds, the Opters had been driven back to the holes.

However, the holes functioned as fighting positions, giving the enemy cover. Their shots rattled off the Jackhammers’ reinforced armor, but a few Breakers went down before Straker and Loco drove the Opters back from the nearest hole and cleared it.

“They’re waiting inside,” Loco said, putting another force-cannon bolt through the hole at a shallow angle. “Too bad Jackhammers don’t have bombs.”

“Missiles will have to do,” Straker said, keying the launchers behind his shoulder blades. “Fire two, keep one in reserve. Set the warhead for concussion rather than armor-piercing.”

“Roger that. Ready.”

Straker checked the Breakers nearby and comlinked them. “Breakers, get ready to follow us in.” He fired one more wide-dispersal force-cannon bolt to fuzz enemy sensors, and then he leaned over as far as he could, placing the palms of his gauntlets flat on the hull close to the opening into the ring, like a man bending at the waist. This position allowed him to launch his missiles directly into the breach.

Beside him, Loco did the same.

“Fire.”

The missiles shot out of their conformal launchers, rocketing through the hole and into the thinning cloud of plasma. They detonated with a combined shock Straker could feel in his hands and feet.

“Go, go, go!” He lifted his palms from the deck and dove into the breach like a swimmer, somersaulting and letting his HUD cue targets. He fired long bursts from both gatlings as he searched for something worthy of a force-cannon bolt. Bullets, lasers and antitank rockets crisscrossed the interior, and he felt several nasty hits like fire on his skin.

A warbot like a giant spider hammered at him with an autocannon, and he fired his ready force-cannon by long reflex. The multi-legged vehicle blew apart, not built to withstand weaponry designed to take out Hok heavy tanks. Straker was glad of his Jackhammer’s doubled firepower as he stood back-to-back with Loco, taking on all comers.

The Breakers battlesuiters poured into the confusion, assaulting vertically along the walls, clearing as they went. With the Opters mainly focused on the two mechsuiters, the Breakers were able to catch them in their flanks and roll them up. Within a minute, they took the section.

Straker checked his Jackhammer. Overall, eleven percent degradation in armor, eighty-five percent power remaining. He was in good shape, but a couple more battles like that and he wouldn’t be. Mechsuiters preferred fights where they could dodge.

Beside him, he saw five Breakers KIA and a dozen in various states of injury and damage. Direct breach assaults were costly—too costly to keep doing this. After all, there were over two hundred spokes in the ring, and if each one had similar strongpoints...

He keyed his comlink. "Straker to Zaxby. Come in, Zaxby."

A moment later the response came. "*Liberator, I am here!*"

"Will you... never mind. Zaxby, I need you to work your skimmer magic on any heavy ring weapons still in enemy hands near *Richthofen*. That will free up *Richthofen* to use her own long-range weapons and aerospace drones to blast these strongpoints. We can't perform infantry assaults on any more of them. It's too costly."

"I've already been doing so, Derek Straker. Remember, I am far more intelligent than you are, and my warrior masculinity has only provided more impetus to analyze the military situation and take decisive action. So, never fear! Zaxby is here!"

Straker held his tongue, but Loco didn't. "Go get 'em, you old squid!"

"I'm no longer elderly. Remember, I have been rejuvenated. I'm like a young warrior on his first hunt! Now cease your prattle. I have Opters to blast. Zaxby out."

Straker looked around as the Breakers took post-battle measures of triage, field repair and reports to Sergeant Major Heiser. "Unfortunately, we're not done. Remember, there are two strongpoints below us that we have to reduce. The middle and lower levels."

"There's got to be a better way, boss."

"There is, I'm thinking." Straker switched channels. "Ensign Conners, where are you and your Marksman?"

"Back on the *Richthofen*, sir. Can I help?" The kid sounded eager.

"Yes, you can. Stand by for orders." Straker expanded the channel to include the controller in charge of the flight deck. "This is Straker. Send all the Marksman dropships to our position, nap-of-the-surface on the ring." He marked the place with his HUD.

"Aye aye, sir," came the reply, and soon, eight dropships skimmed from the *Richthofen* to the holes Zaxby had blasted in the ring's hull, staying low and outside the firing arcs of any possible ring weapons.

Straker ordered the Breakers to load the dead and wounded on the dropships first, and then held the remaining battlesuiters in place on the hull. Once he and Loco were well out of the way, he stood on the hull and watched as he gave the Marksmen their orders.

"Circle up and use your railguns in concert to cut straight through the enemy strongpoints," he told them. "Spread out your shots and keep drilling through."

“Are aye, sir!” came the chorus of responses. The Marksman pilots hadn’t had much to do until now, so they were happy to get their licks in.

The heavy, bottom-mounted railgun on each Marksman had been designed to lance down through a hundred kilometers of atmosphere and spear armored vehicles or bunkers on the ground. It was a slow-firing weapon, taking ninety-three seconds to recharge, but it packed a fearsome punch for its size.

The first shot sliced down through the armored deck, moving so fast its self-sharpening tip flash-melted the duralloy and ripped through the weakened metal. Flame and concussion spewed out of the hole. Eleven and a half seconds later, the next Marksman punched another penetrator along the same path, and then another, and another in turn.

Soon, nothing but puffs of smoky atmosphere came from the breach, but below, each shot must be ripping its way down through deck after deck. Hot shockwaves would have killed many of the Opter defenders and destroyed emplacements.

When Straker judged they’d drilled down far enough, he ordered them to halt fire. He and Loco widened the breach with their force cannon and moved cautiously forward—downward—with the Breakers at their backs.

“Liberator,” the battlesuiters’ platoon leader said, “we have spy-eyes.”

“Right. Send them in.”

Soon, tiny recon drones hovered down, checking out each chamber and looking for surviving defenders. This allowed Straker and his force to advance much more rapidly, clearing as they went. They opened every blast door they found, and Breakers poured in from their positions on the three levels.

Half an hour later, Straker declared the strongpoint complex free of enemy and ordered a halt in place to reorganize. The Breakers had suffered only three more casualties, not bad overall, but he reminded himself that his battles were only the spark, not the flame, of the rebellion.

His HUD told him the Regiment had run into the same sort of strongpoint to the east, atop the next tether. Major Adler had used his Sledgehammers to silence the enemy guns, then the rest of his mechsuits were able to batter and cut the blast doors open with repeated force-cannon jets. He’d lost none of his twenty-eight mechsuits, but he’d used up half his fuel and ammo, and needed resupply before advancing.

In command mode, Straker moved his viewpoint outward and examined what the network could tell him about the overall battle across the ring. Spy drones from the *Richthofen* showed more than half the sections in friendly hands, squawking clear IFF signals. The area around the *Richthofen* was secured out to over one thousand kilometers, allowing the carrier to move a bit farther outward without worrying about getting targeted. This in turn allowed the ship to send her missiles and aerospace drones on nap-of-the-surface runs along the ring hull, destroying even more enemy weapons from outside their firing arcs.

When he confirmed with Sinden that it was relatively safe to do so, Straker ordered “Chief” Auburn and his miners to complete loading their more than fifty landers and make ready for their mission.

“Loco,” Straker said, “I’m leaving you in charge of the military effort while I’m gone.”

“Gone? You still gonna—”

“I’m gonna set things right, Loco. I owe the Calaria that, because I abandoned them too soon and ran off. I ended up leaving a kid there, maybe. I have to fix things.”

“That wasn’t your fault, Derek. Some things can’t be fixed. Shit just happens.”

“I have to try. Keep pushing, General Paloco. Let the locals do the heavy lifting, but apply our forces where they’re needed. None of this will matter if we don’t free this planet and get the people here on our side, so *keep pushing*. Every hour is valuable.”

Loco lifted his mechsuit’s gauntlet in a salute. “Aye aye, sir.”

Then Straker called for Conners to ferry him to the *Richthofen* for the next phase of his plan.

Chapter 17

Flight Deck, ERS *Richthofen*

Straker strode aboard Chief Auburn's lander, now full of miners and gear. He wore a standard spacesuit and carried a hard case full of supplies, which he clamped to the floor in front of him. The lack of a mechsuit or even a battlesuit bothered him, but he wasn't going to wear protection the miners didn't have. He'd take the same risks they did.

Besides, once he landed he wouldn't be using anything so fancy.

"Good to see you here, sir!" Auburn waved at Straker as he sat across the aisle of jumpseats and yelled through his open faceplate.

Straker keyed his comlink. "Surprised, you mean?"

The miner activated his own, making the conversation much easier. "I thought you were out there kicking Opter ass."

The lander shut its ramps and lifted off the flight deck on repellers, heading out into space above the planet. It aimed its engines spinward and fired them, shedding the orbital velocity that kept it from falling. Around it, the other landers did the same, escorted by aerospace drones and Marksman dropships keeping watch for threats.

"I *was* kicking Opter ass," Straker replied, "but I need to give you an introduction to the locals—I hope. Then, I have a personal mission."

"Personal?"

"Very personal." Straker said no more about that, and Auburn let it drop. He couldn't help thinking about it, though—about his child. Maybe a son? Every man wanted a son, no matter what they said. It wouldn't make him love Katie any less, but he hoped...

The lander bucked and maneuvered, pressing them hard into their jumpseats as the G forces overcame the minimal gravplating. Straker suppressed the urge to ask the pilots what was going on. They were professionals. No point in the boss bugging them.

That reminded him. "Everyone have their Opter translator updates?"

Auburn tapped his ear, the universal reference to a comlink. "Checked 'em myself, sir. Can't see how they understand all those clicks and pops, but we talked through 'em and they seem to work."

"Good, because some of the locals only speak the High Tongue—the Opter language. Some use Earthan too, what they call the Low Tongue, and

a few even speak some of the Old Earth languages. Do you?”

“Do I speak another language? A little Bantu, a little French, passed down my family’s generations. Poems, prayers, stories, stuff like that.”

“I wish I had even that much family history,” Straker said, remembering his parents. A few months ago he’d gone to find them on Oceana and reintroduced himself, but the whole meeting had been awkward. His father and mother were like people he’d known long ago, but were dead and long-since grieved for, relegated to mental history. He thought they felt that way too, and after mouthing all the right words and promising visits, they’d all felt relieved to part.

Maybe it was because they now knew there was no blood connection. Maybe old wounds were too painful to reopen. Or maybe everyone had moved on.

He hadn’t found the time to visit them again in the last year.

He’d kept in touch with Mara, though. They were in the same boat. Neither actually related to each other, or to their adoptive parents. They’d found—or forged—a new friendship. Carla and Mara liked each other, too, which helped a lot.

“Lonely at the top, huh?” Auburn said.

Straker sought the man’s eyes across the aisle. “Yeah, sometimes.”

“I wouldn’t want your job. Hard enough being in charge of a bunch of rockhounds.”

“Smart man. Some days I just want to take my family and retire to some tropical island paradise... but I can’t. Not if I want that family to grow up free and safe.”

Auburn snorted with amusement. “Free and safe. Those two things kinda butt heads in my world.”

“Mine too.”

The lander started shaking again, this time with a sustained whistle, almost a scream, that told Straker they’d entered atmosphere. He put his head back and forcibly relaxed. His survival—and maybe that of his child on the planet below—was all in the hands of others now.

Not for long, he vowed.

Minutes later, Straker felt a heavy jolt and a bang. He thought for a moment the lander had taken a hit, but then the ramps dropped and the armed miners began pouring out.

All around, other landers set down and dropped their ramps. They'd arrived on a narrow strip of grassland between a forest and a wide, placid river. The landing jets and vehicles soon churned up enough dust to obscure everything beyond a distance of a hundred meters.

Straker stayed out of the way until the lander was nearly empty, its cases of gear hauled out by the powerful muscles of the miners. Auburn had seemed proud to join one other heavy-planet miner in squatting and carrying a pallet that must have weighed five hundred kilos.

When he had room in the emptying lander, Straker stripped off his suit. Beneath it he wore rugged bush clothing. Over that, he threw on a high-tech reproduction of the chainmail armor he'd worn among the Calaria. He carried a sword, shield and pre-loaded backpack off the lander, leaving the emptied hard case.

He'd thought about bringing a gun of some sort, and eventually settled on a slugthrower carbine not too different from the one he'd used during the prison break so long ago. Anything with more range would be large and unwieldy, and the slugthrower was a simple weapon, rugged and needing no power-pack—just cartridges that wouldn't have been out of place on twenty-first-century Old Earth.

Straker had another reason to keep it simple. During his planetary survival course, one scarred old instructor had told him, "Boy, the fancier your gear, the more you rely on it—instead of yourself. That's gonna get you killed. Most days it's better to have a good knife than a laser rifle. Keeps you humble. Keeps you alive."

He'd never forgotten.

He comlinked Auburn as he headed for the forest. "I'm going into the trees to try to find the locals. Might take an hour, might take a week. I'm hoping for less than a day. In the meantime, *do not* get trigger-happy. Unless someone starts shooting at you, *do not* shoot first. The best trait you can have right now is self-restraint, because most of the locals are innocent civilians. Got it?"

"Got it, bossman."

"So get organized, set up your defensive perimeter, and wait for my instructions."

"Roger wilco."

Straker chuckled. "I see Heiser's rubbing off on you."

"He's a good guy. Good training."

“Hope you remember it, because as soon as I contact the locals, you’ll be moving at full speed into a fight. Be ready.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Straker out.” He changed channels, selecting a direct line to the *Richthofen*’s audiovid specialist assigned to the miners. “Sergeant Liska, this is Straker.”

“Liska here, Admiral,” a young woman’s voice replied.

“You getting everything? Got a good vidlink to the Derekites?”

“Not direct, sir, but I brought my field SAI to create instant three-minute vidette packages. I’ll voice them and bounce them off the spy drone network. The Derekites should be able to pick them up easily and use them for propaganda. Show everyone our glorious victories.”

“And how we’re fighting for their liberation. But not while we’re still ops-sensitive.”

“Got it, sir. Pretty stupid to tell the enemy what we’re doing until we’ve already done it.”

“Use your best judgment, Sergeant, and take further orders from Chief Auburn. Straker out.”

By then, he’d reached the edge of the forest and looked up into the great trees he remembered. The fur-people used them as elevated highways, keeping off the ground where predators prowled. Dangers lurked in the trees as well, but fewer.

Straker remembered Melgar and Neeka, his friends, whom he’d freed from enslavement by the men with the pain-wands. He’d chosen the landing zone as close to the fur-people’s territory as possible, and he hoped to get lucky and find the same tribe or group. If not, maybe they’d at least know of Melgar and Neeka.

He slung his slugthrower, made sure his dagger and sword were handy in their scabbards, settled his duralloy helm on his head, and climbed the tree.

It didn’t take him long to get the rhythm of walking along the high arboreal roads. Though there was nothing manufactured, the pathways were easy enough to follow once he tuned his awareness to look for them. The tops of wide branches were scuffed and worn by bare feet. Some limbs had been removed, and others tangled into each other to form easy handholds. A zone of vision had been cleared, making it harder for snakes or big cats to hide and hunt the fur-people.

The path intersected another path, and then another. Straker didn't know enough about the layout to choose one over the other, so he simply kept going on the main one, hoping that the fur-people would eventually show themselves.

Probably they'd already seen him.

He continued at a leisurely pace, looking for any traces of watchers. He felt as if he was probably being observed, but couldn't pinpoint a source. Twice he saw Rardels, the five-ton turtle-lizards, snuffling below. They turned their great heads upward to gaze hopefully in his direction before continuing their search for carrion or slow game. Once he detoured to avoid a large snake.

The cries and hoots of the forest increased as he reached the largest intersection of the tree-ways yet. He caught movement high above, and so he paused and turned his face upward. In the High Tongue—improved by much practice and brainlink-learning over the intervening months—he called loudly. “Friends! I am Stray-kurr! I seek my friends, Melgar and Neeka, of the fur people!” He repeated this declaration several times.

Suddenly, a rope of vines settled around his shoulders and was jerked tight, pinning his arms to his sides. Instantly, he flexed his muscles to loosen the bindings enough to reach his dagger. He flipped it around in his hand and sliced through the vines with its ultra-sharp molecular edge.

He figured his old teacher would approve.

As soon as he was free, he sheathed the dagger. He unslung his sword and shield and stood ready for more vines.

Two more loops flew his way, but he lopped them off their lines in midair. When that failed, a volley of stones and hard wooden branches came at him. He crouched beneath his shield and let them bounce off. He was armored head to foot in duralloy chainmail, though the rings appeared to be mere steel. Nothing would penetrate, yet he could be bruised.

When the salvo abated he stood and yelled. “I come in peace to meet the fur people! Melgar! Neeka!”

He heard some discussion, perhaps argument, in the High Tongue, before one of his attackers showed. It was, as he expected, one of the fur people. A woman. She approached cautiously, and then cried aloud, “Stray-kurr!”

“Neeka!” Straker put away his sword and shield, doffed his helm and held out his hands.

Neeka threw herself against him in a powerful hug. She nuzzled and kissed at his face. "I am so glad to see you, Straker my friend. We saw the fires in the morning sky and I told the men you were coming. I knew you would return. They didn't believe me."

More fur people began showing themselves, cautiously approaching, watching the interplay.

"You knew more than I did, Neeka. Where's Melgar?"

Neeka's eyes filled with tears. "He is gone, Straker. He was killed by the Skinners, trying to free more of our people."

"You're sure?"

"I saw him fall. He died bravely."

"I mourn, Neeka." Suddenly, Straker realized he was looking at an extra face peeping out from beneath Neeka's arm. "Who's this little fellow?"

"He is Melgar's son, Melnek." She lifted him to put him in Straker's arms, a furry bundle with tiny naked hands and face. "He has only now seen his first summer."

"He's a fine boy," Straker said, bouncing the baby gently. "If you and your people will help, I will try to make sure he grows up free, with no Skinners hunting the fur people ever again."

"That would be paradise." Neeka turned and spoke rapidly to a big man, who was dressed in fine lizard-skins, clearly an important leader of the tribe. She explained the situation as he stood staring at Straker.

He held out a hand. "I am Garthik. Neeka has spoken of you. Forgive us our attempt to capture you. The trees are ours. All know this." Garthik seemed to be half apologetic, half defiant.

Straker handed the baby back to Neeka, and then clasped Garthik's hand. "I'm only a visitor here. I don't want your trees. In fact, I want to rescue those who work to their deaths underground. I have more than five hundred fighters, and many tools for digging, encamped along the river." He pointed back the way he'd come. "I need you to lead them to the entrances of the mines and they will begin their work. It would be helpful if you guide them with your local knowledge—but I know you are few, though brave."

"We are not so few as all that. I will send for the other tribes. We will help free our people. Too long have the Skinners hunted us, netted and drugged us with their poisons, taken our young and our old to die so far

from the Mother Sun.” Garthik turned to bark rapid-fire orders to his people.

Soon, part of the group scampered off, while the rest, all warriors or fit young men and women, clustered around Straker. “Lead us to your warriors, Straker.”

Straker gestured vaguely. “I came from the river, to southeast, but I can’t retrace my own steps. I bet you can. My boots scar the trees.”

Garthik gestured to another man. “Lonnik. Our best tracker. He will find the way.”

The group reached the miner’s encampment in half the time it had taken Straker. As soon as he approached the edge of the trees, Straker stopped the fur people and comlinked on the general channel. “This is Straker. I’m coming out of the forest with some locals. They’re all friendly. Hold fire. Fingers off triggers. Nobody shoot. Pass the word to anyone not on this channel.”

He gave the miners a minute to digest this information. They weren’t soldiers, even if they carried guns and were ready to fight. Part of being a seasoned professional was having the discipline *not* to shoot. Until they’d been through a few battles, they wouldn’t have it.

Straker stepped out first, hands wide, and waited for a miner to do something stupid. When nothing happened, he turned back to Garthik. “Wait here.” He then comlinked Auburn and told him to bring his foremen and meet him at the tree line.

It took an hour for introductions, coordination and explanation. The muscular miners and their strange clothes and weapons didn’t concern the fur people overmuch, but the vehicles—loaders, scrapers, dozers and mini-borers—terrified them until they got used to the clanking metal monsters. But, after an adjustment period, they became fascinated with them, like children, and delighted in riding on them as they moved.

The miners distributed spray cans of non-toxic orange paint to the fur people, and showed them how to mark their shoulders with a simple, bright symbol, a low-tech way of identifying friendlies. The miners themselves wore plenty of safety-orange gear. As with the ancient armies of Old Earth, identification was more important than camouflage.

Once he was sure Auburn and Garthik were getting along like brothers and everyone understood the plan, Straker jogged to the lone lander

remaining in the center of the breaking camp and climbed in. He couldn't stick around to supervise.

He greeted the three-man crew and passed them coordinates. "Take me here, hugging the dirt. Haul ass, but don't get us killed, okay?"

The crusty old enlisted pilot winked. "Don't want that on my next eval, eh, um, Liberator?"

Straker had the impression the man was about to call him "kid" or "son" or something like that. Well, he wouldn't have cared. The longer he wore the mantle of Liberator, the less the formalities of rank and position seemed to matter. As long as people did what they were supposed to, they could say what they liked.

"I promise I'll be fair," Straker said, "as long as we're alive. If you kill me though, you'll never get promoted."

"Fair enough. Strap in tight, son. Ain't gonna be smooth."

Straker nodded and buckled in, taking the spare cockpit seat so he could see out.

The lander lifted and accelerated, brushing the treetops with its armored belly. It shot over low hills and scraped bushes. It threw spray from the surfaces of rivers and ponds. Once, it turned violently away from an unexpected cluster of high-tech towers surrounded by a looming wall.

Straker realized he'd forgotten his anti-nausea meds, clenched his teeth against his rising gorge, and hung on to his protesting stomach contents.

Two hours and five hundred kilometers later, the lander dropped him on the ruined battlements of High Tollen castle.

Chapter 18

High Tollen Castle, Calaria, Terra Nova

Straker—the Azaltar, he reminded himself—stood on shaky legs and breathed deeply of the cool breeze blowing across the ruins of High Tollen Castle. He could easily identify the original breach in the walls, where he and Roslyn and Drake and Karlenus had fought to contain the Bortoks from breaking through and overrunning the Calaria.

At the time, he'd done it because he believed the civilized Calaria deserved defending against a horde of barbarians. He'd considered the aggressors to be guilty until proven innocent. He thought that a people who valued learning, culture, and building stood above those who tried to take what others had made.

He hadn't changed his opinion in the year since he'd been here. However, in his more introspective moments he'd wondered, after being told he'd fathered a child by Roslyn, whether it wasn't mostly about her femininity, about a good man's deeply ingrained urge to protect and accommodate a woman.

A beautiful princess. That hadn't hurt.

Whatever the reason, whatever the history, though, he'd now put himself in a pickle. He could have set down on a high mountaintop near the snowbound areas he'd been told the Bortoks hated and the Calaria knew. He could have joined up with the Calarian remnants and worked with them to drive the Bortoks off. He would have learned of Roslyn, and his child's fate.

He could even have brought down Breakers with weapons that could have slaughtered Bortoks in their thousands, their tens of thousands. But as much as he craved to know about the princess and his progeny, that was not his mission right now. To put them first would be dishonorable.

As it had been ever since his escape from the Mutuality prison camp, Straker's purpose was to liberate humanity from tyranny.

There were over a trillion humanopts on Terra Nova. Many, perhaps most, were indistinguishable from humans, and would join humanity's common pool, a definition broader than just being of Old Earth stock. And, if his and Roslyn's tryst was any indication, there would be no problem crossbreeding.

If a human and a humanopt could make a baby, then the differences were actually only skin deep. That's what Straker told himself as he watched a war party of a dozen Bortoks climb toward him. Each giant man, crimson-skinned and with his black hair in a fierce topknot, bore a shield and a large weapon. They ran heavily up the slope, trying not to huff and puff in the thin air, until they stopped at the base of the tower on which he stood.

"You stand on Bortok soil, puny one. Come down and be killed!" the leader roared in the Low Tongue, a debased form of Earthan. "Throw down your sword, and I will make your death quick and merciful! I, Katog of the Turuk Bortok, command you!"

Straker took a deep breath and stepped to the edge of the tower. He lifted off his helm and showed his teeth to the warriors. Of course, he could unlimber his slugthrower and slaughter them all, but he had a different plan.

He reminded himself of what he'd studied about tribal barbarians and nomads of Old Earth. They usually had a culture of bluff formality that established their hierarchies. They emphasized honor and bravery. Their traditions were oral, rather than written, so speaking well was valued.

He resolved to speak well.

"I am Derek Straker."

"You introduce yourself. You are mannered, for a barbarian."

"As are you. For a barbarian."

The men below guffawed in appreciation.

"Throw down your sword," Katog said again, annoyed.

Straker raised his eyebrows. "You want my sword?"

Katog grinned. "One way or another, I shall have it."

Straker grinned back. "*Molon Labe.*"

"Your words have no meaning."

"They do, for those who will listen. Shall I tell you a story?" Most people loved a good story.

The Bortoks stared upward. Katog gestured, *go ahead*.

"There was a warrior-king called Leonidas, many lifetimes ago. He and three hundreds of his greatest warriors faced a vast horde of enemies at a narrow pass. The opposing king, Xerxes, bid him lay down his sword. His reply, in a tongue more ancient than this one, was *Molon Labe.*"

"And its meaning?"

"*Come, Take It.* If you can."

Katog scowled. "That is a strong saying."

"It is," Straker replied.

"I will write it on your thigh bone before I place it on your pyre."

"You want my thigh bone as well?"

"I shall have it."

"Molon Labe."

Katog blinked. "What happened to Leonidas and his three hundreds?"

"They died."

"Ah."

"Yet they held off the horde for three days, killing thousands. They might have held them off for many days more, if not for treachery. Even so, the enemy army was shaken by their prowess, and was later crushed by Leonidas' countrymen."

"That is a good story. A strong story." Katog eyed the route up the ruined tower, over broken stones and parts of the remaining stairway.

"Nevertheless, we are twelve. You are surrounded. If we climb, you will die."

"As will some of you. Perhaps all. Some will fall, to break your backs on the rocks below. You will lie helpless in your beds and your women will feed you with spoons and wipe your asses until you beg them with shame to cut your throats."

Katog's eyes narrowed shrewdly. "Or we can camp here below until you come down. Or die of thirst."

"You have learned much from the Calaria, I see."

"What do you mean?"

"You adopt their cowardly ways."

Katog glared up at Straker. "You wear the armor of Calaria, but you are not Calaria."

"No."

"You are not Bortok."

"No."

"What are you?"

Straker smiled. "I am the Azaltar."

The Bortok drew back and exchanged glances.

Katog sniffed melodramatically. "The Calaria claimed the Azaltar would save them one summer ago, but the Mak Deen put the lie to that when he ordered the assault that broke the High Tollen once and for all."

“Yet, here I stand.”

“You remind me of the Dragon.”

“The Dragon?”

Katog nodded. “The one they call Drake. Of all the Calaria, I would most like to meet him in battle.”

“He would kill you.”

“You know him, then?” Katog seemed delighted.

“I do.”

“Perhaps I shall let you live, that you may arrange a duel with him.”

“He would kill you,” Straker repeated.

“That I die is of no matter. It is *how* I die that matters. Now throw down your sword.”

Straker smiled once more. “*Molon Labe.*”

“I like you, false Azaltar, despite your tall tales. Yours will be an honorable death, if you will but come down.”

“I see no honor in twelve against one.” Straker thought he could probably kill them all, but that wouldn’t suit his plan.

“If you are the true Azaltar, you are invincible. You cannot lose.”

Straker thought about that. This Katog was filled with barbarian virtues. He reminded Straker of how the histories spoke of the Mongols under Temujin, the one called Chinggis Khaan, when he united the nomadic tribes of northeast Asia on Old Earth. He was fearless but not foolish, bold but clever, unwilling to waste his men but willing to risk death.

Living to fail, not dying, would be this man’s greatest fear.

Straker’s course of action became clear.

“If I come down, I will fight as many as wish to fight.”

Katog nodded.

“But only two at a time.”

Katog plucked a long grass stem from the ground and placed it in his mouth. He chewed on it. “You are the Azaltar. You can easily fight six.”

Straker seated himself on the edge of the tower and dangled his legs high above the Bortoks. “Perhaps I can handle as many as three. Perhaps three is the right number.”

“Perhaps. Yet five would gain you greater honor.”

“Bortoks are large. I am small for an Azaltar.”

“That is true.”

“Then I will fight four at a time.”

Katog considered. "That seems fair."

"Do you swear to send only four at a time against me?"

"I, the Turuk Katog, swear it."

"Then I accept your sworn bargain. Make ready." Straker stared for a moment, still sitting, as the Bortoks shuffled and gazed at him. "I'm coming down now."

"Come down, then."

It was a calculated risk, what Straker did next. Terra Nova's gravity was only about 0.9 G, and the grassy ground on which the Bortoks stood was soft and springy, as he could see their feet sinking into it—but if he turned an ankle, he might not live to regret his gambit.

Straker placed his helm on his head, took up his sword and shield without standing, and slipped off the edge of the tower to slide straight down the one intact wall. The Bortoks, alert warriors all, jumped back and raised their weapons, but they gasped when he landed with bent knees, straightened, and stepped out of the ankle-deep holes he'd created.

He immediately attacked the closest Bortok. With biotech musculature and speed driving his molecular-edged duralloy blade, he chopped through the man's weapon and arm, both. The tip of his sword passed through the warrior's abdomen, slowed by it no more than smoke.

The warrior's guts spilled onto the ground. He fell, face down, to die.

The Bortoks stared, and then roared as one, making to attack.

"Hold!" Katog barked.

Straker stared, waiting.

"You have a magic sword."

"I am the Azaltar."

"There is no honor in magic. Not for a duel. For war, perhaps, where all is fair. But not for a duel between men."

"What's around your neck?"

Katog clutched at a pouch on a thong. "The finger bone of my father."

"Isn't that magic?"

Katog took off the thing and handed it to another.

Straker sheathed his sword, yet kept his hand on the hilt, ready to draw it again. "Perhaps you are right, about magic. I propose a new bargain."

"I'm listening."

"You and me. One against one. No weapons. No armor. No shields. Bare hands only."

Katog chuckled. "This is a trick."

"Is not a night attack a trick?" It had been a night attack which won the Bortoks the High Tollen.

"A successful trick." The Bortoks laughed uproariously.

Straker smiled. "You are afraid."

"I am not afraid."

"Your men believe differently."

Katog glanced around, weighing their mood, and then nodded sharply.

"We fight naked. No tools, no weapons. I will kill you with my bare hands."

"And if you don't?"

"My men will trouble you no more."

Straker mimed thinking, stroking his chin. "No."

"No?"

"It is not enough, if I win."

"What then do you wish?"

"If you fail to kill me, all Bortoks here will serve me."

Katog laughed. "You are not Bortok."

"Nevertheless..."

"They will become clanless, to serve one such as you."

Straker shrugged. "Let them decide for themselves. Maybe they lack confidence in you. Let them go if they want, and you will know."

"Your tongue is as quick as a Magic Man."

"Not a compliment, I gather."

"No." Katog grounded his shield, and then marched to a level spot some ten meters away. He used his heavy mace to draw a circle in the turf. He then threw the weapon to the side and stripped off his jerkin, trousers and everything else on his body.

Straker did the same, placing his belongings in one spot with his dagger and sword atop the pile. He remained ready for treachery, though he didn't believe it would come.

Katog addressed his men. "Any who wish to go, go now. If you stay, you are bound by my word."

Some glanced at others, but after a moment, they stilled. None departed.

"They are good men," Katog said.

Straker nodded. "They are good men."

Katog, naked, looked Straker up and down. "Your manhood is as small as the rest of you."

“Yet I will bury it in your women,” Straker said, playing the game of insult. “I will father sons upon your wives and sisters. Your bloodline will be strengthened by my seed.”

Katog laughed, as did his men a moment later. “Bortok women would not have one so small.”

Straker pursed his lips. “What hunts the Rardel?”

“The Rardel?”

“The giant turtle-lizard that lives in the forest. Something must hunt it, or it wouldn’t need an armored shell.”

“I know the Rardel. I only wonder why you ask. Are you stalling? Do you fear?”

Straker squatted to rub his hands in the turf. It wouldn’t do for them to slip. “Indulge me. What hunts the Rardel?”

“The Liger.”

“What is a Liger?”

“A great cat, larger than three men. Or five like you.”

Straker ignored Katog’s wit. “Yet much smaller than a Rardel, surely.”

“That is true.”

“Its size is of little consequence.”

“That is also true.”

“Yet the Rardel fears the Liger.”

“The Rardel fears nothing,” Katog said, bristling.

“The Rardel will learn.” Straker stood and brushed his hands. “Let us begin.”

Katog charged.

* * *

Foreman Auburn—despite the military folks calling him Chief, he didn’t think of himself that way—drove a front-loader, the second of the column of vehicles as they bulled their way through the forest. The lead vehicle was a dozer. Between the two, they were able to cut, shove, scrape or remove any obstacle. The tracks and wheels of the following equipment created a rough road as they drove.

Beside him, Garthik held onto the roll cage and grinned delightedly. Auburn had at first thought the fur-man might be upset by the wanton destruction of bushes and small trees. Apparently, though, he didn’t

consider the forest floor to be his domain, or not as important as the high roads. Many of the fur-people scampered through the trees above rather than ride on the vehicles.

They made surprisingly fast time, for the trees were large, spaced well apart, and shaded much of the forest floor, limiting the undergrowth. That undergrowth was no match for dozer blades. Garthik directed them generally northward, toward where he said the Skinners guarded their tunnel entrances.

Twenty kilometers later, the land began to rise into hills and the trees began to thin. Garthik leaned over to yell, "The Skinners will see us soon. They will certainly hear us."

Auburn's comlink handled the translation, turning his words into the clicking Opter tongue. The High Tongue, Straker had called it. "How soon?"

"One hour, perhaps two."

Auburn had already established that a local hour was very imprecise. The fur people had no clocks, and divided the daytime into ten periods they called hours. Still, it gave him a general idea. He comlinked this information, reminding his people not to shoot at anyone in the trees.

One real hour on his chrono later, Auburn called a halt. He was no tactician, but he figured that if they hadn't run into Skinners by now, or found their tunnels, they should be getting close.

Auburn looked up at the sun above the trees. Late afternoon. If this had been a normal job, he'd camp his people and start fresh the next day—but this was war. As Straker had emphasized, every hour counted. He told everyone to take ten, eat and drink something, but stay sharp.

Garthik leaped off the loader and into the nearest tree without a word.

Taking his own advice, Auburn ate a ration bar and drank half a canteen of water, and then took a piss against the nearest tree.

Five minutes later, Garthik returned. He gestured vaguely upward. "Many warriors have joined us."

Auburn could only spot a handful. "How many?"

"Many. Three hundred at least. Perhaps four. More gather as the word spreads."

"Three or four hundred. That's good. Can they scout out a Skinner tunnel entrance?"

“They have. It is that way, a fifth of an hour.” Garthik pointed ahead and to the right. “Many guards. They will flee in terror of your metal beasts.”

“Can you surprise them and kill them? It would be better if they didn’t get away to warn anyone.”

Garthik shook his head. “Always they have guards and more guards behind in the tunnels, and this is a large trading point. They will fight, and then they will retreat into their tunnels. This I know from our raids in times past. They have grown careful. It is difficult to kill them all and sneak into the tunnels to free our people. Very difficult.”

Auburn thought about this. The Skinners had primitive firearms, perhaps gunpowder explosives. His miners could break through their defenses by main force, but odds were, he’d lose some to accidents, snipers, and booby traps.

But he had a better idea than a frontal assault. “Is there a hill above the main entrance?”

“Yes.”

“Lead us to the top of that hill. Watch the entrance guards and tell me their reaction when they hear our equipment crashing through the forest. If they send out a scouting party, we’ll surround ’em and ambush ’em.”

“It shall be done.” Garthik climbed up to speak to his people. He then rejoined Auburn and directed the long, snaking column of equipment up into the low hills.

After twenty minutes, a furred scout dropped onto the dozer to report to Garthik. “The Skinners have sent out warriors to see. Fifteen men with guns coming this way toward the sounds.”

Garthik nodded. “Make a chain of guides to show the way. Track and surround them from above. When the shooting starts, attack from the trees.”

The scout departed.

“Friend Auburn, give me ten of your warriors, with guns.”

Auburn comlinked for a squad of veterans to report to him. When they arrived, he turned them over to Garthik. “Follow this man and do what he says. There’s a party of about fifteen Skinners comin’ to see what the ruckus is all about. Ambush them. Kill or capture them all.”

The grizzled former soldier in charge of the squad nodded. “No problem, Chief.”

Garthik led the squad into the forest.

Auburn waited. Ten minutes later, he heard a distant flurry of shots. Ten minutes after that, the squad returned with two wounded Skinners. Hooting and triumphant, fur people scampered above.

Auburn looked them up and down. They were rough men and wore fur coats... made of the fur people, as Straker had told him. His lip curled. Might as well be cannibals, he thought. He felt like executing them on the spot, but that would be wrong, though he couldn't explain why. Still, they deserved punishment.

"Strip them naked," he told the squad leader. "Give them and their furs to the fur people. The furs might be...they might be the remains of friends."

The miner-soldiers looked disgusted, as if they'd only now realized what the furs really meant. They quickly stripped the two men naked and turned them over to the fur people, who bound and carried them off through the trees.

Auburn tried not to wonder about their fate. "Let's go," he said. "Garthik, lead me to the top of that hill."

Chapter 19

High Tollen Castle

Straker slipped to his left as Katog charged him, ducking beneath the Bortok's outstretched hands. He leaped upon the enormous man's back and wrapped his right arm around Katog's throat, locking it into place by pinning his own fingers in the crook of his left elbow. The Bortok's neck was so thick with muscle he was barely able to do it.

Katog grabbed Straker's forearm with his tough fingers, his nails digging in deep, drawing blood. Straker hung on grimly, throttling Katog's windpipe and arteries.

Katog threw himself backward, falling with his full weight on his shoulders, trying to crush his assailant. Straker's breath was driven from him and his vision blurred as he felt a sharp pain in his back. Katog had cleverly fallen on a rock, gambling Straker wouldn't spring free—or if he did, that would at least get the smaller man off of him.

Nothing for it but to hang on, Straker told himself. He could have fought a different kind of fight, striking with his hands or kicking, breaking bones or going for a knockout, but he wanted Katog functional at the end of this.

He hoped he hadn't made a mistake.

Katog rolled and bucked, his claw-like fingernails tearing at Straker's skin, but slowly he weakened. After a long moment, he finally stilled, unconscious.

Straker rolled off Katog and checked him, making sure he still breathed. Usually such a chokehold cut off blood to the brain quickly enough to put the man to sleep without stopping his respiration or his heart, but the distance to death wasn't far.

Katog would recover.

He bounced to his feet, glaring at the gaping Bortoks, who so far seemed so surprised they hadn't thought to take action. He pointed with his blood-drenched right arm in a slow circle. "You are my men now."

"We are yours," one said, and then the others echoed him. They threw their weapons at his feet.

Straker raised his bloody arm over his head like a blessing. "Take up your arms in my service. Tend to Katog. Deal with your dead one in

accordance with your customs.”

The Bortoks—*his* men now—hastened to follow his instructions.

Straker rummaged in his backpack and found a can of skin-seal. After rinsing his arm with clean water from his canteen, he sprayed the bandage on. It would sterilize and protect the lacerations long enough for his enhanced healing to take over. What irony it would be if he were killed by some exotic humanopt disease contracted out of sheer carelessness.

Straker dressed himself again in his armor.

When Katog came to, the Bortok sat, still naked, his back against a boulder, his head hanging between his knees.

“Katog,” Straker said, standing before him.

Katog raised his heavy head. “Azaltar.”

“You are mine.”

“My men are yours. I am dead.”

“That was not our agreement.”

“I am dishonored. Kill me.”

“You gave your sworn word.”

“That my men would be yours, yes. But not me.”

Straker grinned and motioned for his men to gather. He spoke to them. “Who can recall the terms of our bargain?”

One, the one who had first acknowledged Straker’s primacy, whose name was Toryak, seemed shrewder than the rest. He spoke. “If Katog fails to kill you, all Bortoks here are yours.”

“Toryak speaks true. All Bortoks here are mine—including you, Katog. I command you now. I command you to live and serve me.” Straker held out his hand.

Katog stared at the hand. “You are clever, Azaltar. I do not wish to live, but I will honor my word.” He reached out and took the hand.

Straker lifted Katog to his feet. “Don’t worry, Katog. You’ll have your chance to die soon, but you’ll do it for a good cause.”

“What cause is that?”

“You will help free this world and all in it.”

“Free them from what?”

“From the tyranny of the insect people. Have you seen them?”

“I have seen them. The Magic Men speak with them often, and they proclaim them gods.”

“What do you believe?”

“I believe they meddle in Bortok affairs. I believe they are servants of Shaytan, the god of evil.”

“Your belief is closer to the truth than not. My people call the insects Opters, and are at war with them in the heavens. I have come to this place to help free humans from Oper tyranny.”

Katog snorted in amusement. “How shall eleven Bortoks do such a thing?”

“We shall enlist the Mak Deen to my cause. And thus, all the Bortoks.”

Katog laughed. “The Mak Deen is implacable. He is the greatest Bortok ever to live. You shall not shift him.”

“How does a man shift a boulder?”

Toryak spoke up. “With a lever.”

“Then we need a lever.”

“What will be your lever?” Katog asked.

Straker shrugged. “That, I don’t yet know. In the meantime, take me to the Mak Deen.”

“As you command, Azaltar.”

“Mak Deen is a title, right?” Straker asked. “In some older language?”

“Yes.”

“What does Mak Deen mean?”

“Guided One,” Katog said, rubbing his throat.

“Guided by whom?”

“Ullach.”

“Ullach is some kind of god?”

“Ullach is the greatest god. The other gods envy him.”

A theocracy, then, Straker thought. A primitive one, not quite monotheistic, but getting there. Historically, religions usually proceeded from polytheism toward monotheism. The concept of one top god, or one God only, often accompanied and supported monarchy. It was easier to unify people when God and King lined up neatly, when the monarch could claim to be anointed by a single, all-powerful God.

Clearly, by luck or by shrewd skill, the Mak Deen had adopted this principle. The problem with such a strategy, though, was that all the eggs of loyalty ended up in one basket. If the Mak Deen could be shown not to have Ullach’s favor, he’d lose support. Or, if he experienced a serious secular setback, maybe his warriors would think he was no longer the Guided One.

Two pillars of support—physical prowess and spiritual strength—also meant two potential weaknesses.

Straker knew his own strengths, and so thought he knew how he might deal with the Mak Deen.

“Let’s go,” he said.

The Bortoks hefted their shields and weapons and began to jog down the slope toward the lowlands. Straker quickly found out why they fought with no more armor than leather clothing, shields and swords. His own chainmail, though lighter than steel and well fitted, was still not an ideal outfit for distance running. His metal-shod feet developed blisters after ten kilometers.

Calling for a pause, he removed all his armor except for his chain shirt. He vehemently wished he’d brought running shoes or even hiking boots, but he hadn’t thought of it when he was planning. After some contemplation, he took off his duralloy boots and wore only his socks. They were made of tough knitted polymer, and would probably last a day or two at this pace.

Fortunately, he had more socks. Still, he made a mental note to have Bortok-style sandals made.

“Do you plan to challenge the Mak Deen?” Katog asked.

“Maybe.”

“He is stronger than I. Much stronger. You will not defeat him with such a simple trick.”

Straker smiled. “I have more tricks.”

“The Mak Deen will not respect you in armor,” Katog said. “Armor is for barbarians.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Straker eyed him. “Are you feeling better?”

“How I feel is of no matter. I will honor my word. I am your man.”

“Good. I need your advice. I don’t know Bortok ways.”

“You knew them well enough to ensnare us.”

“Ensnare you?”

“You are clever and strong, Azaltar. You are worthy to lead Bortoks. But do not forget, you are not Bortok.”

“How do I become Bortok?”

Katog’s eyes widened. “One is born Bortok.”

“Surely there’s some way to be adopted into the tribe.”

“You might wed a Bortok woman.”

“No other way?”

Katog shrugged. “I have not heard of it. Perhaps the Magic Men will know.”

“You mentioned Magic Men. Who are they, anyway?”

“They are holy ones, users of magic, granters of knowledge. The Magic Men advise the Mak Deen.”

“So they’re from Ullach?”

“They claim to worship all gods. I question their devotion to Ullach.”

“Are the Magic Men Bortok?”

Katog laughed aloud. “No.”

“Calaria?” Straker remembered Gorben, the King’s advisor, had also spoken of the Magic Men.

“They are different from other men within the Walls of the World.”

“What do they look like?”

Katog stared at Straker with astonishment. “I thought you would know. They look like you, Azaltar.”

* * *

Foreman Auburn stopped at the very crest of the hill beneath the largest tree he’d ever seen. Five hundred meters away lay one large entrance to the lair of the Skinners and their slaving, trading empire. Their warrens ran for tens of kilometers, perhaps hundreds, and communicated with other humanopt dizzes or areas. That’s what he’d been briefed, anyway.

How many Skinners were there? Commander Sinden’s report had estimated more than a million. There was no way Auburn could conquer a million people, even if their weapons were primitive.

But he’d do his part.

He comlinked Sergeant Liska. “You ready to record?”

The media specialist replied, “Already working, Chief. I’ve networked everything with a camera or sensor already. You do your thing, and I’ll make you all vidstars.”

Auburn snorted. “Thanks—I think.” He changed channels and began to direct the work.

First, the big tree came down, roots and all. The fur people helped. He had no idea if they worshipped their trees or even valued them highly, but right now, they didn’t seem to care.

Then, the miners scraped the top of the hill flat and bare to fifty meters radius. This gave them enough room to use the ground-penetrating sensors to create a good map of the tunnels below, out to a thousand meters in all directions. Auburn and his top engineer then selected the entry points.

There would be three. One would intersect the tunnels behind the nearby main entrance, cutting off the Skinner forces gathered there to defend. Two others would break in at large halls, where there would be slaves to rescue and access to several more tunnels at once.

Unfortunately, Auburn didn't have planetary borers that could cut large tunnels at high speed. He'd had to make do from the *Richthofen's* stocks of combat engineering equipment. But he and his people were used to improvising, and digging was digging. A thousand meters was nothing.

Two hours later, the tunnels were mostly dug and had been stopped fifty meters short of breakthrough. Platoons of his miner-soldiers, accompanied by armed mobs of orange-marked fur people, waited on his order.

He gave the order.

The miners ripped through the final fifty meters to burst forth out of each tunnel, taking their enemies by surprise. They rapidly killed anyone with a firearm. The fur people yelled to their comrades not to pick up Skinner firearms until they'd been clearly marked with orange.

Auburn assigned his best fighters to the main entrance cutoff tunnel. Others of his miners used their vastly superior firepower to assault from the outside. That created a pincer effect, and the entrance quickly fell. This would allow fur people to pour into the tunnels and spread out through them.

More and more fur people were showing up, called from their forest hideouts. Hundreds became thousands, and Garthik claimed there would be tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, within days, attacking every Skinner entrance they could.

The Liberator had assured him it was all about lighting the fire. Auburn's force was a spark, nothing more—but a spark that would ignite a conflagration of freedom and rebellion.

Auburn himself led the way into one of the large caverns. It turned out to be a massive moss processing center. Thousands of chained fur-people sorted, bagged, seasoned and cooked the plant matter, creating foodstuffs ready for consumption or sale.

They were overseen by at least a hundred guards, who gawked for precious seconds as miners and free furred warriors burst through the wall. Miners used blasters and slugthrowers to kill Skinners as quickly as possible. A few carried heavy stunners to incapacitate everyone in an area, if a Skinner tried to hide among the slaves.

Auburn himself toted a simple slugthrower pistol in one hand and a meter-long steel bar in the other. He shot a few guards, but preferred to attack them more personally, with the improvised bludgeon in his hand. There was much less chance of him missing his target and hitting an innocent.

Once, a Skinner shot him in the chest with a musket bullet. The blow struck him like a strong man's fist, but didn't penetrate his ballistic vest. The pain energized him. He felt like a warrior of long-ago Old Earth, from a time before powered battlesuits became standard for infantry use.

That Skinner he shot in the chest. It seemed a fair exchange. The Skinner went down, blood spurting from the exit wound in his back.

The next Skinner tried to stab him with a knife on the end of his musket—a bayonet, Straker had called it. Auburn battered the gun barrel aside with his steel bar, and then brought the metal club down on his attacker's head with hard-driven muscle.

The slaver's head shattered.

Auburn was at once sickened and exhilarated by the combat. He'd never killed before, not until today. He'd thought it might be difficult, but the sight of the chained fur people brought to mind Straker's report on the butchery and cannibalism the Skinners practiced.

Garthik had told him the Skinners even fathered children on the women of the fur people deliberately, in order to make more slaves. Keeping these atrocities in mind soothed his stomach and his conscience.

And he reminded himself that he was liberating this planet, which Straker hoped would become a thorn in the Opters' side—the Opters who'd killed many of his miners at Billerbeck.

It took less than a minute for his forces to seize the cavern. He had only one miner wounded. The fur people had a dozen injured and several dead, but they handled their own casualties and were already racing down the many tunnels leading from this place. They would spread the revolt as far as they could, and his miners would back them up.

Sergeant Liska strode briskly up to him, her helmet studded with fastened-on vidlinks and cameras. Tiny recon drones hovered and circled her, getting every angle. “Great work, Chief Auburn! I saw you get a few of those Skinners personally.”

Auburn stared at her, in something of a daze as the adrenaline drained out of him. “I did my job.”

Liska continued in vidcaster’s voice, “And a fine job it was, Chief Auburn! Just like your miners, all of Derek the Liberator’s forces are well on their way to freeing millions in this section of Terra Nova, and are putting paid to all who practice tyranny.” She turned away and spoke to a hovering camera drone. “If you’re seeing this and you’re oppressed, take up arms and kill or capture anyone on the side of the insectoids. The Opters are our enemies and yours! If you’re an oppressor, there’s no need to suffer—change sides! Desert and join a Derekite unit today! Fight on the side of right and freedom! This is Yvgenia Liska, speaking for the Liberation Forces. Look for more reports from the front lines... and, *cut*.”

Auburn’s jaw dropped. “You really think anyone will fall for that?”

Liska grinned. “Never underestimate the gullibility of the public—and billions on this planet are accustomed to believing anything an Opter propvid tells them. The Derekites are feeding my stuff into the newsnets all over the place, suitably modified or translated for each target market.”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Doing my job? I’m in hog heaven, Chief. Aren’t you?”

“I guess I am.” A yell and a flurry of shots turned Auburn’s attention to a large door, just broken open by his miners with a mini-borer. “Sorry, I’ve got things to do.”

He left Liska and jogged back to his loader, its driver already clearing the cavern by the simple expedient of scooping up moss, bins and furniture and shoving it against a wall, and hopped on to plug his helmet into its boosted comlink. From there, he accessed his HUD and issued digging instructions and orders to his squads to use their weapons and equipment to break through Skinner strongpoints.

Straker had been right, Auburn thought. His people made good combat engineers. Maybe, when this was all over, he’d think about changing careers.

Abruptly, his HUD lit up with alarms.

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Chapter 20

Skinner tunnels beneath the Fur People forests

Auburn sorted through his HUD alerts, trying to make sense of what was going on in the underground tunnel complex of the Skinners. Parts of the perimeter were colored with the symbol for water. Could that be right? Or was the network SAI misinterpreting something?

“This is Auburn. What the hell’s going on?” he asked after selecting the comlink of a scraper-track in a cavern near the area with the unexpected reading.

“This is Randall, boss. It’s flooding! We’re trying to dam it up, but it’s too strong and we’re downhill!”

Auburn’s mind raced. He was accustomed to low-gravity mining on asteroids and moons, so the closest he’d come to this situation was dealing with cryo-volcanic magma slush on ice planetoids. With that, the best thing to do was get out of the way until the movement was done, and then return to the area when things had calmed down.

Get out of the way...

“Listen, Randall. Drill a drain to the next level, fast!” Auburn said.

“Divert it downward. Use your HUD and ground penetrating sensor maps to keep leading the water farther and farther down away from you. Try to get it into a natural river.”

“Right.”

“I’ll send you some help when I can. In the meantime, think like an engineer, not a miner. Drainage!”

“Yeah, drainage. I got it, boss. Randall out.”

Now that he understood what was going on, Auburn issued orders to converge on the water intrusions and attack them like an enemy. The Skinners had obviously flooded the tunnels, a clever defensive tactic. They might have prepared it to suppress a rebellion, drowning the slaves. They’d never expected to deal with well-equipped miners.

It took Auburn three times as long as it should to get his people organized. He’d been briefed that everything in war, even the simple things, became difficult, but he’d never believed it until now. The water, the cave-ins and booby traps, the sneak-attacks by Skinners, everything added up to constant chaos, nothing like a properly planned and organized dig.

But Auburn found he liked it anyway. It made him feel alive in a way he'd never experienced. The enemy ate human flesh and draped themselves in human skin. Killing them felt... *righteous*. That was the word.

He directed those around him to tunnel downward to the next level in case the water reached his position here, using his loader to help. He began chanting a work song, a digging refrain generations old, something to pass the time and stave off the boredom of the long days underground. After a few moments, he heard others on the comlink, which had activated with his voice, singing the same song.

Together, they dug.

Together, they sang.

The fur people warriors continued to spread along tunnels beyond the reach of Auburn's sensors, moving desperately to free their kin before Skinners slaughtered or drowned them. Within hours, the water had been diverted down many passages, to eventually drain away into caves or rivers. It passed through, no longer a threat.

With the initial area secure, Auburn set up a command center in the best cavern, compacting earth for dividing walls. Bubble supports held up the dirt long enough for sprayed-on stabilizers to create roofs and ceilings. These rooms supported lighting, screens, consoles and a portable holotank to help him visualize the massive underground warrens of the Skinners.

He found them to be the size of cities, far larger than he expected. Every time he thought he reached the end, his scouting parties and sensors discovered more of them—kilometers, tens of kilometers, hundreds perhaps.

By the end of the day, he found the diz-walls, which extended downward over a hundred meters as well as upward. The high-tech materials were apparently too hard for the Skinners or any other low-tech people to break through, but not for Auburn's laser drills and diamond-tipped borers. Once he determined the barriers could be broken, he ordered his miners to halt and rest for the night.

Freed fur people, now in their tens of thousands, guarded his machines and miners from attack, but there was no need. The Skinners were on the defensive. In many cases they'd vanished from the tunnels.

The next day, Auburn led the drilling into the diz-wall. He'd been briefed on what was known about the thick structures—that they had stairways and lifts and passages and rooms used by the security forces, and

were used to contain, limit, guard and control the dizzes and the people in them. Breaking through the diz-walls was one of many tactics that would favor the Derekites and the rebellion.

When Auburn and his miners entered the diz-wall, they found it deserted. Fur people scouted ahead, backed up by miners with high-tech weapons. Sergeant Liska stayed near Auburn, narrating a running commentary and asking him leading questions for public consumption.

When he'd climbed the stairwells to the surface—lifts were too easy to ambush—Auburn cautiously opened the door and found himself on the south side of a massive public square bounded by buildings ten stories high. He checked his comlink and HUD eyepiece to ensure his IFF was working, and waved his people forward.

Each platoon of twenty to forty fur-people was assigned a miner with an IFF and a modern weapon. In this way, Auburn multiplied his combat power. He was still very thin on the ground, but his orders were to keep spreading, keep the rebellion going, keep upsetting the security forces' apple-carts.

The platoons spread out, each heading for a different building that ringed the plaza. When they got halfway across, mixed small-arms fire broke out from the east side buildings. It came from the building roofs and high windows, and fur people began to fall. His troops returned fire and, caught in the open, ran forward rather than back in order to gain cover.

"Get into the nearest building!" Auburn called over the general channel. "If there's enemy above you, fight your way to the roofs. From the top of the buildings, fire from there to suppress the enemy on other rooftops. If the fur people can, have them assault from rooftop to rooftop."

He continued to give orders as he waved his own platoon forward. Garthik approached him as he did so.

"Can your people climb the outside of the buildings?" he asked the fur-man.

"We will try." Garthik and his troops raced along the edge of the wall to the right, toward the enemy. One, then another of his people fell, wounded, but most made it to the base of the enemy-occupied buildings.

Auburn pounded along behind the fleeter fur-people, firing his blaster at any target he could see. Mostly he broke windows. He found he wasn't much of a marksman, but it felt good to fire.

Garthik led his warriors up the outside of the first building. It turned out to be easy enough, as the structures had balconies and fittings on the outside, and the fur-people were expert free-climbers. They seized gun barrels sticking out of windows and swarmed through into the rooms to kill defenders. Often, they launched their enemies off the balconies, to die with heavy thuds on the pavement below.

Auburn himself ran into the building and began methodically climbing the central stairwell. On the fourth floor, a door opened and a woman with a slugthrower fired at him, spattering him with ceramic shrapnel from the wall tiles. He ducked, and then returned fire.

His shots were the more accurate. One struck her shoulder and spun her around, so he charged upward and knocked her reaching hand away from her fallen weapon. She surrendered, open-palmed, as he aimed his blaster and prepared to end her life.

Then he caught himself. The humanopt diz-security forces weren't Skinners. As far as he knew, they hadn't forfeited their right to surrender because of cannibalism and war crimes.

Instead of killing her, he spray-sealed her wound, and then fibertaped her hands and feet. She'd be in pain, but she'd live.

Then he continued upward.

He killed three more enemy troops before he met Garthik on the roof. From there, he fired across the gap at the next rooftop, where enemies crouched. Shots from other rooftops suppressed the dozen or so security personnel. The fur people took running leaps, launching themselves from the step-like parapets, to land and roll among the enemy. Five or six more fur people were wounded or killed, but soon that building was also secured.

Ten minutes later it was over in this section of the diz.

In the distance, he could see an enormous pyramidal building, a citadel of sorts. It seemed an inviting target, but should he even try to reach it? He had so few miners, though the ranks of his fur people continued to swell as they converged on their hated Skinner enemies.

Auburn shook his head to himself. For now, he'd finish securing the underground and see how the wider war was progressing. He posted a thin cordon of armed miners around the plaza and told them to hold and report.

* * *

Straker ran with his Bortoks. They passed groups of the red warriors as they continued down the slopes and mountain valleys toward the lowlands. He saw Bortoks guarding and supervising others—mostly Calaria—who worked in fields to farm the land.

One more group to liberate.

Katog had said the Magic Men looked like him—like Earth-standard humans, presumably, or near enough. He guessed the Magic Men were some form of humanopt agents, meddling in the affairs of Bortoks and Calaria in the same way they meddled in everyone's business. Their "magic" would be technology, like Straker's ultra-sharp sword.

He pondered how to deal with them as he ran.

Perhaps twenty kilometers later, they came upon the remains of a large Calaria town. Its walls were ruptured and many buildings showed signs of burning, but the town wasn't entirely lifeless. Calaria, all with eyes downcast and many in leg irons, carried out tasks among the ruins and near the walls. They tended gardens or herds of cattle, or tilled the ground, or bought and sold at open-air shops. Ribbons of smoke rose here and there, and Straker saw a small river feed an overshot water wheel, perhaps power for a mill.

So the Bortoks weren't complete barbarians. Like many hunter-gatherers or nomadic herders, they probably considered settled agrarians to be inferior. The warriors swaggering among the defeated Calaria certainly weren't doing any work, but they were smart enough to make the Calaria work for them rather than just pillaging.

It was here Straker saw his first Bortok women. A group of four shopped in the small market near the ruined town gates, attended by two warriors. The women wore a mishmash of Calarian cloth and their own leather, and their faces were veiled from forehead to upper lip by dangling gold and silver chains.

"We should eat and drink here, Azaltar," Katog advised.

"Somewhere we won't have to kill anyone," Straker said.

"I can assure you of nothing."

"Do your best."

Katog led them past the market, through the ruined gates and into the town. They walked down the main street, where maybe one in three buildings were occupied, until he found a functioning tavern of sorts. He

chased away two Calaria sitting at the rough wooden tables outside, and the Bortoks took seats. They roared for service.

The Calarian tavern-keeper hurried out the door, bowing and scraping. He wore no chains. "What is your desire, noble ones?"

Katog ordered ale, meat and bread. He gestured, and Toryak paid the man with silver coins.

Straker raised his eyebrows.

Katog grumbled, "The Mak Deen has declared they must be paid for their goods and services."

"Interesting. What do you think of that idea?"

"It is not for me to say."

"I insist you say."

"I will not speak against the Mak Deen."

"You're no longer in his service. You are in mine, and I do not serve the Mak Deen."

Katog furrowed his brow in thought. Eventually, he said, "I do not agree with the order. We should take what we want."

Straker nodded. "Do you know sheep?"

"Sheep. Yes, the animals. The young are tender eating."

"Are they sheared for wool here? To make yarn and thread, for garments?"

"The Calaria do so, several times a year."

"My people have a saying. *You can shear a sheep many times, yet slaughter him only once.*"

Katog pondered further, so long that Toryak spoke up. "If the tavern-keeper is not paid, he will soon have no tavern."

Katog shot a glare at Toryak, who shrugged.

"Toryak is correct, as is the Mak Deen," Straker said.

"The Mak Deen is wiser than I," Katog said with a look of revelation.

"No doubt."

"Wiser even than Toryak," Katog continued, side-eyed.

Toryak smiled with mirth. Straker made note of the light of shrewd intelligence in his eyes. He resolved to watch that one, who was younger and a bit smaller. He reminded Straker of Tafar, the junior engineer.

When they'd eaten, drunk, and relieved themselves, they continued onward. They jogged across good farmland that slowly descended. The ground and the rivers became drier and there was more and more grassland.

When evening came, the group camped on the banks of a stream. Two warriors visited a farm nearby and came back with a goat, which they slaughtered and roasted as the sun set.

“Goats cannot be sheared,” Katog said, prompting a gale of laughter from the Bortoks.

Straker found the warriors agreeable company.

He put on his armor and helm before he slept under a lightweight, high-tech blanket. He thought his Bortoks would honor their promises, but better safe than sorry.

His caution saved his life.

He awoke with a sharp blow to his chest, accompanied by a hiss like escaping air. He rolled out of his blanket and instinctively came up with his slugthrower, a gunman’s instinct rather than a swordsman’s. In the dimness he saw a shimmering figure.

He aimed and fired, twice. The loud shots woke the Bortoks, who leaped to their feet.

Straker slung his gun and swept out his sword. “Stoke the fire!” he called, and charged at the position where he’d seen the figure. There he found an Earth-normal man on the ground, gasping and writhing in pain. A Bortok brought a flaming branch.

In the firelight, Straker could see the man wore an odd coverall with a control knob at its collar. He scrabbled at the knob in futility, as if doing so would perform some function.

Straker slapped the man’s hand away and put a mailed knee atop the fallen man’s firearm. The coverall looked like a stealth suit, but its mechanism had been smashed by a bullet.

“Who are you!” he growled.

“He’s a Magic Man,” Toryak said. “Like you, Azaltar.”

“I’m no Magic Man,” Straker replied. “Not like this one. He tried to kill me. Bring me my satchel.”

When a warrior brought Straker his backpack, he retrieved a tiny hand-light and used it to examine his own chest armor. He found a dart embedded in his tightly woven duralloy mail.

“Not kill you,” the fallen man gasped. “Just a drug to put you out...”

“Bullshit,” Straker said. “You’re alone, and in the middle of armed men. There’s no way you could kidnap me and carry me out of here. You’re an agent, a loyalist humanopt, doing your spy thing. Is it poison, or something

worse?” Straker could imagine a number of drugs that would render him useless without killing him. Something to make him crazy, or give him brain damage, or weaken him so much the Bortoks would abandon him in disgust.

The man shook his head, winced, and then fell unconscious. Nothing Straker could do would revive him. Soon, it became clear the agent had died. He must have had some kind of suicide pill or device.

Well, that settled whose side the Magic Men were on.

“The Magic Men are now my enemies,” Straker said. “Remember that.”

“We will remember,” Toryak and Katog said together. They eyed each other, nostrils flaring.

Toryak dropped his eyes, and then turned to Straker. “I heard thunder-weapons.”

Straker nodded. “Mine. You know of them?”

“The Skinners use them. They are cowards who hide in holes. They emerge near the Wall of the World. We kill them when we find them.”

“The Skinners are also my enemies. Here, hold this light. Aim it at the Magic Man.” He passed the hand-light to Toryak and stripped the dead agent, taking his various possessions, including his stealth suit. “How long until daylight?”

“One hour, perhaps less,” Katog said.

“Keep the fire going, and stay alert. We leave at dawn.”

Straker used the time to repair the stealth suit. It only needed several splices in its wiring. Once he was sure it worked, he donned it and activated its night vision function.

After explaining to his warriors what would happen, he used it to scout the area, searching for more agents. He found no one, so perhaps the Magic Man had operated alone. He might have tracked Straker from High Tollen and, with nobody to help him, had tried to assassinate Straker with a dart. If he’d succeeded, he’d have simply slipped away.

He considered trying out the enemy comlink, but it was an unfamiliar type and he didn’t want to give himself away. In fact, he decided to throw it in the next river they came across. It probably incorporated a tracker.

A tracker... the hair on his neck stood up. If he were the dead agent, he’d have called for an armed aircraft to pick him and his drugged prisoner up.

Perhaps he’d been telling the truth, just not the whole truth.

Straker crushed the comlink underfoot, and returned to camp. “We’re leaving, now.”

“We do not see well at night,” Katog said.

“I do. Follow me.” He filled his backpack with gear, and continued to wear the stealth suit, though he turned off its light-bending camouflage. He used the night-vision function to lead the way away from the camp, in the general direction of the Mak Deen and Bortok lands.

Twenty minutes later, he heard the sound of jets, an air vehicle landing, and knew he’d been right. The Magic Men—the Opter security agents—were after him.

Straker found a dense copse of trees and led the Bortoks in. “We wait here.” He wasn’t sure how sensitive the sensors the aircraft carried were, or whether energizing his stealth suit would make him easier or harder to spot, so he left it turned off.

They waited until well after dawn. The aircraft—an aircar like the ones he’d seen in the modern dizzes—made several widening circles, but eventually it left. Apparently it was not an intelligence-gathering or surveillance craft, just a transport. Straker counted himself lucky.

He changed back into his traveling outfit and told Katog to lead them toward the Mak Deen.

Chapter 21

With the Bortoks, at the Mak Deen's encampment

After crossing grassland for half a day, Straker and his Bortoks arrived at a great camp. Enormous wagons with tent-like structures atop them competed for space with large cattle. He couldn't identify the breed, but they looked like a form of wildebeest.

Straker estimated there must be ten thousand people or more in this camp. It was set on the banks of a river. He saw women washing and children playing in the water upstream, while the cattle were herded to a spot downstream.

Groups of warriors stared curiously as they approached, but none barred their way until they reached a compound set near the center of the camp. At that point, they were stopped by a group in distinctively colored leathers of red and green.

"Hold! Who dares approach the presence of power?" the leader of these warriors demanded.

Katog and the others turned toward Straker. Apparently, as Straker was the boss, Katog wasn't going to speak for him. Straker had inquired about Bortok customs when he could over the last day's travels, but he was still mostly improvising.

"I am Derek Straker, called Azaltar," he said loudly. "I have come to see the Mak Deen, and to make him bow."

All the warriors around stared in astonishment, and then hooted with exaggerated laughter. They slapped their sides, clapped their hands, and struck each other on their backs.

At least they hadn't tried to kill him for his outrageous insult. In a culture such as theirs, bravado was admired—at least, as long as you could back it up.

The leader, the largest of his squad, replied, "I am Patok, captain of the Second Hundred of the Mak Deen. You are courteous, for a barbarian. I will make chimes of your bones."

"*Molon Labe.*" The line had worked before, so Straker figured it was a winner.

"Your words have no meaning."

Katog and Toryak exchanged amused glances with the rest of the men.

“The words mean, *Come and Take Them*. If you can.”

Patok swung a fist at Straker’s jaw, very fast for a big man. To Straker’s biotech senses, the blow seemed to float toward his face in slow motion.

The human jaw is vulnerable, as it moves easily. At its hinge, it intersects with nerves that can be disrupted. That’s why a man can be knocked out with such a blow.

The temple is also vulnerable, in a different way. The skull is thinner, softer there. A blow to the temple can kill.

The forehead, however, is tremendously strong. It is arched and thick, and can even be used as a weapon... or a defense.

Straker kept his eyes on Patok’s fist and moved his forehead directly into the way of it. He felt the impact, but minimally. His skin split and bled, but that was more dramatic than effective.

The human hand, unlike the skull, is composed of many bones, each of which breaks easily.

Patok’s right fist broke in several places. He roared with pain and shook the hand, which was already swelling and useless. Angry, he swung his left fist.

Straker simply caught and stopped that one with his own right palm. It was large and difficult to grasp, so he wrapped his fingers around the Patok’s thumb and applied a submission hold. The pain forced Patok to kneel, his face a mask of agony.

He then kicked Patok in the jaw. The Patok’s head lolled.

Straker spat in the dust, and then put his hands on his hips. “Anyone else?”

The stunned warriors stared at this man, so much smaller than they, who had brought down one of their best men without breaking a sweat. The blood on Straker’s head only added to the drama.

Toryak struck his shield with his mace. Katog and the rest of Straker’s men picked up the applause, beating on their shield faces with their weapons. The others, of the Second Hundred, followed suit.

A huge warrior, whose colors were white and green, shoved his way through the throng. Ten others, equally large and fierce, followed with him. Those of the Second Hundred made way for them.

“Explain this disturbance!” he barked. Then his eyes fell on Straker. “Who is this puny barbarian?”

The warriors around drew back, giving the new man room to confront Straker, who spoke as he wiped his bloody face with his under-sleeve. "I am Derek Straker, the Azaltar. I easily defeated the captain of your Second Hundred. In fact, I'm getting tired of these weak challenges. I will see the Mak Deen. Take me to him."

The warrior spoke, wary. "I am Makol, Captain of the First Hundred. You defeated Patok?"

"I did."

Makol gestured to his own men. "Seize him."

Katog and Straker's men interposed themselves. "We are the Azaltar's," Katog said. "You will not have him."

"You defend this barbarian?"

"We are his men," Katog said.

"Then we shall seize you as well." Makol motioned.

All the warriors—more than a hundred—closed in.

Straker had a split second to choose how to react. He could have fought them. With his sword and armor and slugthrower he could kill until he grew tired. But he'd long since decided on a different strategy. He had to work within the Bortok culture. He needed them enthusiastically on his side, not grudgingly bent to his will.

So he let himself be taken, and his men had no chance at ten-to-one odds.

Straker was disarmed, bound, and marched into the central pavilion. On a throne built of bones and animal skins sat the largest Bortok Straker had ever seen, perhaps two-and-a-half meters tall and weighing two-hundred kilos. Unlike the usual long, braided or tied hair, this one's skull was shaven and tattooed with patterns.

The Mak Deen.

On the Mak Deen's left stood two smaller men, not Bortoks, wearing clothing of fine make and weave in modern style. They had bejeweled devices in their ears—comlinks, obviously, though decorated, perhaps to disguise their function. They also wore equipment belts with various pouches and gear, including what looked like stunner wands.

Magic Men? Undoubtedly.

To the Mak Deen's right stood a Bortok in robes of fine cloth, carrying a staff topped by a golden sphere. A priest of Ullach?

Behind the Mak Deen, with her hands on his shoulders, stood a woman in fine robes, her upper face obscured by golden chains dangling off her headdress. From what Straker could see, she was young and beautiful.

“Kneel before the Mak Deen,” the priest said in the voice of a preacher.

“I am the Azaltar. I kneel to no one,” Straker stated.

The warriors to his left, right and rear struck him on his shoulders and the backs of his legs with the hafts of their weapons, and he was driven to the ground.

“You are kneeling now,” the woman sneered.

Straker flexed his arms and broke his bindings. He then seized a thick spear haft and jerked it from Bortok hands. With superhuman speed he swung it in a circle at ankle height. Every warrior within reach had his legs swept from under him. From the impact, he’d probably broken several shins. Straker rose to his feet and leaned on the spear. “Here I stand.”

The Magic Men put their hands on their stunners.

“Don’t,” Straker said in the High Tongue. “I will kill you both before those weapons clear their holsters.”

The Magic Men’s faces displayed astonishment, and they moved their hands to their sides.

“Great Mak Deen,” Straker said, “I have journeyed far to meet with you. How many of your warriors must I kill, how many bones must I break before you will hear me?”

The Mak Deen lounged on his throne, his eyes calm, supremely confident. He spoke in a deep, resonant voice. “What if I say: *all of them?*”

“Then I shall kill them all.”

The Mak Deen locked eyes with Straker. After a moment, Mak Deen spoke first. “I believe you would try.”

Straker nodded. “Yet, I am not your enemy.”

The woman’s sneer had disappeared. Now, her lips parted slightly and the tip of her tongue showed. Her hands gripped, rather than caressed, the Mak Deen’s shoulders, and she breathed deeply.

The priest leaned over to speak quietly to the Mak Deen. The huge man showed no expression. After a moment, he waved the priest away. The priest seemed angry, but held his tongue.

Apparently, the priest’s advice was not welcome.

“I have heard of you, Azaltar,” the Mak Deen rumbled. “You stood with the Calaria at High Tollen, yet you are not Calaria. You killed many

Bortoks, yet you say you are not my enemy. I am told you would make me your man, the way you've made these others yours."

"That is true."

The Mak Deen stood suddenly, towering above all. "How would you do this?"

"Trial by combat. It is your way, is it not?"

The priest spoke. "The Mak Deen of Ullach does not allow foolish challenges to waste his time."

The Mak Deen made a flicking motion at the priest. "Metchmeth speaks out of turn, but truly. We are not barbarians, fighting randomly for dominance. The mark of a sophisticated culture is the rule of law. Trial by combat is not to be employed haphazardly. You have not earned the right to challenge."

Straker smiled. "I hear the Magic Men in your words."

"Truth is truth, no matter where it's found."

The priest of Ullach looked sour at this remark.

"That is a wise saying," Straker said. "I bring you this truth, then. The priest of Ullach and the Magic Men are both trying to use you for their own purposes. The priest is not my enemy, but the Magic Men are. I know them from my own land, where they seek to enslave all in the name of the insects known as the Opters."

"You speak ill of the gods," one of the Magic Men said. "They shall punish you."

"The Opters are not gods, as you well know—and if you've used those comlinks lately, you know they're losing this planet to my forces," Straker said.

The Magic Man who spoke seemed astonished. "Your forces?" The other turned away, activating his comlink, and murmured into it.

"I am Derek Straker, the Liberator, called Azaltar. The Derekite rebels are named for me. Our stories are all over your newsnets."

"Then why are you here, in this backwater?"

Straker grinned wolfishly. "Backwater?" He addressed the Mak Deen. "You see how the Magic Men sneer at your empire and your people?"

The other Magic Man returned from his comlinking. "He is the Derek." The one who spoke lifted his stunner, which he'd drawn while his back was turned. The other reached for his, in its holster.

In a blur of motion, Straker hefted and cast the spear he held. It drove through the chest of the one holding the stunner, who fell, instantly dead. Straker took two long strides and seized the stunner from the other Magic Man before he could activate it. He pressed the button and stunned the man, who collapsed atop his dead comrade.

In the silence of surprise, Straker retrieved his sword belt, buckled it around his waist, and prepared to fight.

Belatedly, a forest of weapons leaped up to surround Straker. “Relinquish the magic wand,” the Mak Deen said.

Straker understood this to refer to the stunner, not his sword. He let the stunner dangle from its wrist strap and held it out to the Mak Deen.

The big man took the device and placed it on the arm of his throne as he sat. He waved, and the weapons withdrew. “What did he mean, *you are the Derek?*”

Straker shrugged. “My name has become a rallying cry and a designation for the rebels who wish to free this world from the tyranny of the insect Opters—the false gods.”

“There is no God but Ullach,” Metchmeth said.

“Be silent, priest,” the Mak Deen said.

The priest ground his teeth.

“If you wish to challenge me, Azaltar Derek, you must first complete the Four Deeds.”

Straker raised his eyebrows. “Name them.”

“To alone strike an armed enemy with your fist and return to tell the tale. To take a weapon from an enemy with your bare hands and live. To steal an enemy’s cattle. To command warriors in battle.”

Straker contemplated trying to tell the Mak Deen he’d often done three of those deeds, but he’d never stolen cattle, and he really didn’t have time for argument about qualifications. So, he spoke, continuing in the archaically formal tone he used with these people. “Great Mak Deen, my ways are not your ways, but I am a warrior and a leader. There is a great war raging across the world. I need you to fight for my cause, and I need you to grant mercy to the Calaria and give them their lands back. If you help me achieve these goals, your people will prosper. If not, I will leave you now—but when I return, I will bend you and all the Bortok to my will with irresistible magic, and my yoke will not be light.”

The Mak Deen stroked his chin. He'd seen Straker's speed and the strength of his arm. He must have heard reports of Straker's fighting last year at High Tollen. No doubt he'd be wondering just how much damage Straker could do before he was brought down by a mass attack. Could the dangerous little man even reach the Mak Deen himself and kill him?

It would be wise to place a wall of warriors between Straker and himself, but that would make the Mak Deen look like a coward, Straker knew. The Mak Deen was trapped by his own culture. Any weakness, any bending, must be clothed as strength and wisdom rather than as compliance.

In other words, Straker had to give him a way out. He waited, hoping the man opposite him was shrewd enough to see the same.

"First," the Mak Deen said, "you claimed you wished to make me your subject. Now you say you want my help, and that of my noble people, for your holy war against the Opters. You are a strong champion, Azaltar. Therefore, I might grant one boon, but not both. Which is the greater in your eyes?"

Ah-ha! The Mak Deen was even smarter than Straker hoped.

Good.

"If I made you my subject, I would also gain your help in war," Straker said. "Yet, I am a merciful Azaltar, and have no wish to humble you, O great Mak Deen. We are both strong champions and we are both wise men. Let us not wound ourselves by struggling against each other. Therefore, I will accept your second boon."

"Then I shall grant it."

"I thank the great Mak Deen." Straker thought he'd won without fighting—the pinnacle of strategy, according to Sun Tzu.

But perhaps not yet. The Mak Deen continued. "Granting mercy to the Calaria is difficult. They murdered my father under flag of truce."

Straker's memory tickled. "The Calaria claimed Bortoks murdered the King's son under flag of truce some years ago."

The Mak Deen sat straight, placing his hands on his knees. "That is a lie. The Calaria expanded their farms and settlements into our treaty lands until we were forced to defend ourselves, driving out the settlers. The war spread. The Calaria gathered allies—the Skinners, the Lake People, the Half-Men—and tried to wipe the Bortoks out, tribe by tribe, clan by clan. Guided by a holy vision from Ullach, I united all the Crimson Warriors and drove them back. I then sought peace under the white flag."

“What happened?”

“As I had no son, I sent my father to the parlay pavilion, located between our encamped armies. They murdered my sire and all other Bortoks there.”

Straker’s eyes narrowed. He could see no deception in the Mak Deen. The man believed his own words. Whether they were true or not was still to be determined.

“Were there Magic Men there at the parlay?” Straker asked.

“Yes. And a priest of Ullach.”

“And for the Calaria?”

The Mak Deen shrugged. “I do not know. All Bortoks died, so I had no report.”

“Did the Magic Men in attendance survive?”

“Their bodies were not found.”

“And these?” Straker gestured at the dead and the unconscious one.

“Others, who came later.”

“It seems obvious what happened.”

The Mak Deen gazed ahead in thought. “That both we and the Calaria were duped. The Magic Men did not want peace.”

“Correct. The Magic Men’s methods are to keep all but themselves weak by fighting each other. My people call that *divide and rule*.”

The Mak Deen nodded slowly. “I understand. But there is more. You want us to grant mercy to the Calaria, who hold nothing but the high mountain fastnesses. You say nothing of our other enemies. What do you care about the Calaria in particular? Why did you fight for them at High Tollen?”

What reason could Straker give? That he simply fell into his alliance by circumstance? That he trusted his gut and a princess, and both had failed him? That he assumed that the nomadic barbarians were inherently less worthy of his help than the town dwellers?

He couldn’t say all that without alienating the Bortoks and making himself look foolish. But there was a more plausible reason.

“Do you know the princessa, Roslyn?”

“I do. She is the woman of the one called Drake, the Dragon.”

“She bore me a child.”

The Mak Deen’s lips curled. “From what I hear, you are fortunate she didn’t cut off your manhood after your coupling. Yet, a man may do many

things for a woman. Killing is hardly the least of them.”

The woman behind him ran her hands along the Mak Deen’s naked shoulders, yet still she seemed to be staring at Straker.

“Roslyn is not my woman, but her child is my child,” Straker said. “I would see the Calaria survive. If you would grant mercy, there might yet be peace. You and they might still learn much from each other.”

“I will grant mercy to the Calaria and make peace with them... but you will do something for me,” the Mak Deen said.

“What’s that?”

“Only blood can bind in this way.” The huge warrior reached up to take the young woman’s hand. With it in his grasp, he brought her around in front of him, where she stood demurely. “You will take my sister Zurenia as yours.”

“Sister?” Straker froze, trying not to swallow convulsively. Damn, he’d thought the woman was the Mak Deen’s mate, not his sister. “I already have a woman.”

“Roslyn is Drake’s now.”

“Not Roslyn. I have a, a... a mate-for-life, among my own people. Her name is Carla. She is mother to my firstborn.”

“Then take another. Zurenia is young. She does not need to be first wife.”

“My customs don’t allow more than one wife.”

“That didn’t stop you from coupling with Roslyn.”

Straker lowered his eyes. He couldn’t admit Roslyn drugged and tricked him, but what could he say? That she seduced him? That would be just as bad, and would contradict his refusal to take Zurenia.

The Bortok leader stood. “The Mak Deen has sworn he will take no woman until Ullach is done with him. On this, my vision and the priests agree. Wed my sister, and you will be my brother, bound to me by blood. Zurenia is beautiful, and will bear you many strong sons.” The big man’s eyes seemed to plead with Straker to understand. “Through her, my father’s line will continue, and will partake of the strength of your seed.”

Straker was boxed in.

So, this is the way to make it all work, he thought. A political marriage. Carla would never understand, and frankly, it felt like he’d be betraying her... but balanced against liberating Terra Nova, how could he refuse?

Straker wavered. Was the help of the Bortoks even necessary? He could call for pickup, go grab his child and any Calaria who wanted to relocate to a safe area, and forget about the Bortoks. Maybe the Derekites would win without any further push from him. It was a big planet.

But maybe they wouldn't win. Each rebellion was like a spark that set another fire aflame.

For want of a nail, the shoe was lost. For want of a shoe, the horse was lost. For want of a horse, the battle was lost.

For want of a battle, the kingdom was lost.

What the hell, thought Straker, finally. Take the plunge. Win now, ask Carla's forgiveness later. There might even be some wiggle room with this marriage thing. "I accept your proposal, noble Mak Deen." Straker took Zurenia's hand, and then paused. "Do you have a name, O Guided One?"

The Mak Deen reached to clasp Straker's other hand in his own. "I am Nazeer... brother Derek."

"Well, Nazeer, how fast can you organize a wedding?"

Nazeer clapped his huge hands twice, sharply. "Prepare to be amazed."

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Chapter 22

With the Bortoks, at the Mak Deen's encampment

Within the hour, Straker was married again, at least according to the laws of the Bortoks. In his own mind, he didn't consider himself wed to anyone but Carla, but at the same time he had to acknowledge that he'd made a pact, a commitment, to the Mak Deen and to Zurenia.

He rationalized it by telling himself that his heart would only ever belong to Carla, but the fate of millions was worth making this sacrifice. The trick would be rationalizing it to Carla. Like most women he'd known, she believed the worst about men's lusts.

When the ceremony was over, the Bortoks carried the bride and groom, cheering, to a luxurious pavilion. There, they deposited them at the doorway.

"Enjoy your marriage bed," Nazeer said, straightfaced. "She is a virgin, so be kind."

Straker merely raised his eyebrows. What could he say to that? Besides, it wasn't any of the Mak Deen's business what went on between a man and his new wife. Nazeer had twisted Straker's arm on this, so he didn't get to dictate terms.

But he tried. "We will see the bloody furs at dawn," Nazeer said.

Bloody furs? Straker racked his memory. Some Old Earth cultures expected the new couple to hang bloody sheets out the window after consummation, to prove the bride's maidenhood had been ended.

Straker nodded. "You shall have them. But first, a custom from my own people." He turned and swept up Zurenia in his arms, carrying her across the threshold.

Behind him, Nazeer drew the curtain.

Within, Straker saw the pavilion was divided into concentric rings of hangings. His feet sank into soft layers of fur. He resolved not to look too closely at the furs, in case any were of the fur people. He already felt damned by this deal with the devil; he could hardly be damned further.

Instead, he set Zurenia down. She was short and slim for a Bortok, but still overtopped him by several centimeters even after she kicked off her wedding sandals.

She took his hand, her face glowing. “Come, husband. Let us partake of the delights of our bodies.”

Straker led her inward to the center, to a pile of furs that formed a bed. Here, the sounds of the camp were muffled by the many thick hangings. Light leaked in from small screened panels in the roof, but there was barely enough to see.

“You don’t strike me as a virgin,” Straker said in a low voice.

Zurenia smiled, sloe-eyed as she drew off her heavy golden headdress, revealing lovely black eyes and dark hair framing a high, intelligent forehead. “I will not strike you at all, unless you wish it, my Azaltar.”

Straker took that as confirmation. The Mak Deen’s sister looked to be much more experienced than commonly acknowledged. Nazeer couldn’t be so naïve, so he was playing this for the public. For some reason, that made him feel a lot better. It would still be cheating on Carla, technically, but at least he wasn’t deflowering some poor young girl in the process.

That got him thinking. Maybe...

“Zurenia, do you want to be married to me?”

“I always knew my match would be a political one,” she replied. “For a time I was intended for the young prince of the Calaria. It would have settled the war, but when they killed my father—I mean, when the Magic Men killed our father and the prince too, I suppose—my hopes were dashed. Since then, I’ve stood as a bargaining promise as my brother keeps the tribes united. He knew that as soon as I married one clan chief, the others would go mad with jealousy, and the Bortok unity might dissolve into the old fractious ways.”

“I see.” And Straker did. Only an outsider like him could keep the situation stable. “And in the meantime, you’ve had lovers.”

“Of course. What else is there to do in my gilded prison?” Zurenia seemed amused. “This matters to you?”

“I suppose it makes it easier to regard this as a matter of politics rather than love. I feel like I’m betraying my wife.”

Zurenia lay on her side on the furs, head propped on her palm. “Your people take only one wife, for a lifetime, you said. The Calaria take one, but a year at a time. Our men are permitted four wives, if they are valiant and wealthy enough. If this were not so, many women would go unmarried, as so many of our men die in battle. You are here among us, so you must observe our customs, not yours.”

“Clever reasoning, but Carla won’t see it that way.”

“You are a great warrior. Are you not master of your women?”

Straker laughed. “That’s not our way.”

“Why not? Women wish to be mastered by men, do you not know?”

“Some do, some don’t, I guess.” He grinned. “Do you?”

Zurenia rolled her hips back and spread her legs. Her skirt still hid her inner delights, but her meaning was made clear. “I wish *you* to master me, no other, my Azaltar.”

Straker felt himself responding to her invitation. He couldn’t help it. Maybe he wouldn’t feel as guilty about it if he didn’t enjoy it, but if he didn’t enjoy it, he couldn’t perform, and if he didn’t perform, he couldn’t get Zurenia pregnant—short of kidnapping her and bringing her up to the *Richthofen* for artificial insemination, anyway.

Besides, Bortok customs were such that they insisted the marriage be consummated.

“Wait a minute... if you’re not a virgin, the furs won’t be bloody.”

Zurenia smiled lazily. “Men are such simple creatures. A small cut on the thigh, a little blood, and the custom is fulfilled.”

“Of course, of course... but then, we won’t need to consummate the arrangement at all.”

Zurenia’s face froze. “You do not want me?”

“Ah...” Straker shifted his legs. His arousal was becoming obvious. “Of course I want you. That is, my body wants you, but it would make it a lot easier if I could stay faithful to Carla.”

“You could lie to her.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Then I must lie to my brother, to the priests, and to my whole people, that we are truly married. Would you be so selfish?”

“You’re already lying, claiming to be a virgin.”

“There are lies and there are lies. This one is not possible.”

Straker turned away, trapped by her logic. One of them would have to lie big.

“Besides,” she continued, “you must father a child on me—and all will know. A Bortok father will not do, nor even a Calaria. The child must have your strength... and your face.”

He sat back slowly, to finally lie flat on the furs next to her, not touching, staring at the lighted mesh panels on the ceiling. “Well, I tried.

But you're right. I have to do this."

"Your words make a woman feel special," she said with more than a touch of bitter sarcasm.

Straker turned to see tears in Zurenia's limpid eyes. He touched her cheek. "I'm sorry, Zurenia. You *are* special. You're gorgeous. It's terrible that you're trapped in this situation instead of being able to choose your own husband. I apologize for being selfish, only thinking about my own problems."

Zurenia pressed her lips to Straker's palm. "And I'm sorry if your wife is hurt by this. I will beg forgiveness of her, if you like, and I will always respect and obey her as First Wife and my mistress."

He stroked her shining hair and pondered. "Who knows? That might actually work."

She leaned toward him, and her lips met his. "Love me, Azaltar." She drew on the laces of her tunic, and it fell from her skin, revealing the ripe apples of her full, crimson breasts.

Oh, hell.

Straker loosed the reins of his body. Like a stallion, it rose to the challenge.

* * *

The happy couple's day of passion blended into a deep sleep. Straker awoke in the early hours before dawn and rolled a drowsy Zurenia aside until he could pull loose the top fur of the bed. With his dagger, he nicked himself on the lower hip and dripped the blood into a spot in the fur's center, as he imagined a loss of virginity might leave. He added a few artful smears, and then folded it into a bundle.

When he stepped out under the stars and the arch of the world-ring above, he saw Nazeer sitting cross-legged on the ground, staring into a fire. His guards ringed the fire at a distance. Perhaps he'd slept that way, but now he lifted his head and gazed at Straker. The man was so tall that their eyes were almost at the same level.

Straker tossed the bundle at the Mak Deen, who caught it. "It is done," he said.

"You are not pleased?"

“Zurenia pleased me very much, but there is a war raging. Up there,” Straker indicated the ring above, “and here on the ground. My mind turns to these things.”

The Mak Deen set the bloody fur aside, unexamined, and rose. “We are brothers now. You have done me a favor against your customs. I will make peace with the Calaria for the sake of your children. Yet, I need to know what you expect my warriors to do.”

“Do you have a war room? A council chamber, where you plan strategy?”

“Come.”

Nazeer led Straker to his grand pavilion. Inside, he showed Straker an area hung with maps, hand-drawn on fine leather, like vellum. They displayed the lands within a huge hexagon of walls, more than a thousand kilometers from side to side. As marked, the Bortok lands took up most of the area, including the former Calarian holdings.

Straker found himself astonished. He hadn’t realized the extent of the territory. “How many are your people?”

“More than a thousand of thousands, one-third of them prime warriors.”

“Over a million people and three hundred thousand troops...” Sparse for this planet, considering the land area covered, Straker thought. But, the way the Opters divided their dizzes didn’t always make sense to his eye. Maybe this was some kind of wild park, a zoo for preservation of the nomadic lifestyle—just another laboratory experiment.

Well, these lab rats are about to break out of their cage.

“Have you ever wished to travel beyond the walls of the world, O mighty Mak Deen?”

Nazeer showed his teeth and his face lit with interest. “Since I first saw them at Makkah, on my pilgrimage to the east.” He tapped a map, a symbol marked at the east wall.

“What is there, at Makkah?”

“A stone, the Mother Stone, from which the first Bortoks sprang. A temple encloses it now, raised in my father’s father’s time.” Nazeer spat, and pointed at a hanging hide-painting of an impressive, ornate building. “The priests of Ullach decreed it, over the words of the sacred writings that no Bortok should ever build a permanent structure. A special revelation, they said.”

“That’s convenient.”

“Just so. Since then, the priests’ power and wealth has grown. At times I am scarcely able to command warriors beyond my own clan’s. Only by bringing the clans victory after victory have I remained supreme, but many have been seduced by the riches that trade with those atop the wall brings.”

“Trade with those atop the wall?”

“Goods are lowered and raised on ropes, fine things we can’t make. The priests profit handsomely and pay greedy clan chiefs to do their will. If this goes on, in a generation we will become farmers and merchants ruled by priests, instead of warriors subject only to Ullach.” Nazeer spat again.

Straker gazed at the temple. “How big is the holy stone?”

Nazeer spread his hands. “As tall and wide as two men. It is made of pure crimson, to match Bortok skin.”

“And the temple itself is not holy? Only the stone?”

Nazeer’s eyes narrowed. “I would agree with you, but others might not.”

“Would a demonstration of power, one that damages the priest’s trade, be viewed as sacrilegious?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I’m trying to see if an attack upon the temple of greedy priests would be viewed by most as an attack on Ullach, or as a restoration of purity?”

The Mak Deen smiled slowly. “The temple is an abomination. Destroy it, but not the Mother Stone, and I will do the rest.”

“I need you to do more than that,” Straker said. “I can destroy the temple and break the walls that bound your territory. You must order your warriors to spread through the walls and conquer everything in sight, in my name—in the name of Derek, the Liberator. They must attack our enemies and aid our allies. Our allies wear orange. Our enemies... it may be difficult to tell, but if you see no orange among them, they are probably our foes.”

Nazeer stroked his massive chin. “Many will die.”

“Can’t avoid it.”

“Avoid it?” Nazeer grinned. “Why would we avoid it? There will be more widows to marry, so every living warrior may have four wives. There will be loot for all. It will be glorious.”

“As long as we win.”

“With you and me to lead our forces, how can we lose?” Nazeer clapped with delight.

“I need my possessions,” Straker said.

“I will send for them.”

Soon, warriors brought Straker’s gear. He slipped his comlink in his ear. “Nazeer, this is magic, what we call ‘tech,’ that allows me to talk to my own warriors in the ring above.”

“I understand. The Magic Men had such powers. They talked to other Magic Men. Sometimes, they gave magic gifts, such as this.” Nazeer picked up a lamp and pushed a stud. The lamp lit itself.

“If we take this world and drive off the Opters,” Straker said, “you will have more magic than you can now comprehend.”

“I do not wish for magic. I only wish for our ways to be preserved.”

“That I cannot promise.”

“Then victory will be enough.”

Straker activated his comlink. “Straker to *Richthofen*.”

“*Richthofen* here,” the voice of a watchstander said.

“Patch me a full datalink, then put me through to Lieutenant Sinden.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

While he waited for Sinden to come on, Straker brought up his virtual HUD in his brainlink. He first took a look at the ring.

It was rife with a confusing mass of symbology, but a quick overview showed him that most of it was in friendly hands. The Regiment still had twenty-five mechsuits operational, an outstanding result, and the Breakers had only sustained about fifteen percent casualties, of which fewer than twenty were KIA. Thankfully, the security forces simply weren’t equipped to fight elite combat troops.

“Sinden here,” she said.

“Commander, give me an update.”

“Ah, sir, I’m a lieutenant.”

“You’ve done outstanding work here. You don’t think you deserve a promotion?”

Sinden’s voice paused before resuming, cautiously pleased. “Thank you, sir. Yes, sir, I think I do.”

“Me too. Now earn your pay.”

“Aye aye, sir. We’re mopping up the ring. The orbital high ground has allowed us to selectively reduce enemy strongpoints on the planet below, out to the horizon, which roughly means the equator and out to a thousand kilometers either side. We’ve either destroyed or captured all warships in the system except for one frigate that stayed loyal to the Opters. That one

launched message drones to other systems and is lurking at the edge of flatspace, observing.”

“Forget that, it can’t be helped. Go on.”

“We can selectively strike targets beyond the ring’s horizon using *Richthofen* or her small craft, but we’re extremely short of assets. It’s there, away from the equator, that the security forces are still holding on.”

“Give me a visual overlay of this diz—this area, within the walls, centered on where I’m standing.”

Sinden pushed a graphic through his comlink to his brainlink and thence to his virtual HUD. He overlaid it on the Mak Deen’s map in his vision.

“Adjust to match the scale.”

“Adjusting...”

It wasn’t perfect, but close enough. Straker could see the temple and trading post was just beyond the reach of the ring’s weapons horizon.

“Do the remaining loyalists have any ground-based heavy weaponry? Anything that can reach into space?”

“Yes,” Sinden replied. “There’s a fort at each pole, designed to cover what the ring couldn’t reach. They’re proving to be tough nuts, the only serious threat to our spacecraft. Captain Smits has rebel tugs shepherding some asteroids this direction, but it’ll take days, maybe weeks, to get them here and aimed to fall on the forts. The good thing is, they can’t control much ground territory.”

“Fair enough. Get Smits in this link, and stay with me.”

Once Smits came on, Straker explained what he wanted his forces to do.

Chapter 23

With the Bortoks, at the Mak Deen's encampment

Nazeer, Katog and fifty Bortok warriors—including Straker's sworn men—stared dumbfounded as the boxy Marksman dropship set down just beyond the edge of camp. They tried to hide their astonishment, but they couldn't. They'd obviously never seen anything like this fifty-meter-long flying building before.

They'd certainly never seen anything like a Jackhammer mechsuit, revealed when the loading doors swung wide.

"Is that a god?" Katog asked.

"No. It's a machine, like a catapult or water-powered mill. Or like the objects the Magic Men use. It's just one hell of a lot bigger and more powerful."

"Do you command it, Azaltar?"

"I do. Let me show you."

Straker led the warriors into the dropship's interior. As it was made to hold four mechsuits, there was plenty of room with only the one clamped into its fittings. He placed his palm on the lock pad for the suit to scan, brought his eye to within the ocular reader's field of vision, and then punched in the open code.

The suit's overlapping chest plates swung wide, revealing the cockpit. Straker stripped off his chainmail and swung himself into the contoured cutout that enfolded him during battle. He didn't bother to plug in, but he did close the suit and project his own visage on its meter-wide faceplate.

"This is my ship, my steed of war," he said. "It's called a mechsuit."

"Mek-soot," the Bortoks echoed.

"I want one, Azaltar," young Toryak said. "What must I do to have one?"

Straker chuckled, and then sobered. Why not, if the kid had the right physical stats? It was extremely unlikely—one in a million—but it wasn't impossible.

He opened the suit and dismounted. "Few have the prowess for a mechsuit, even among my own people. A warrior must be blessed with a lucky blend of talents of body and mind. Someday you Bortoks may be

given the chance to find out. Until then, though, you'll have to fight in your own way. But..." Straker picked up his chainmail, "try this on."

The high-tech chainmail had been cleverly woven to stretch far more than a low-tech steel version would. Even so, it was tight, and Toryak needed the help of his comrades to don it. It fit only because he was small for a Bortok.

Straker plucked a dagger from the belt of one of his men and slashed it across the mail. It didn't even leave a scratch. "It will serve you well."

Katog emitted a jealous growl low in his throat.

"Patience, my friend," Straker said. "The armor is too small for you anyway, but I give you this." He handed Katog his molecular-edged dagger.

"Thank you, Azaltar," Katog said, mollified.

When Katog glanced at his sword, Straker shook his head. "Don't be greedy. This is for the Mak Deen." He handed the sword to Nazeer. "You may have to modify the hilt to fit your hand, and be careful—the blade will cut steel or stone."

Nazeer drew out the blade halfway, examining it, before sliding it back in. "It is a kingly gift, brother."

"And not the last, brother." To the other nine of his original sworn men, Straker gave useful trinkets from his backpack—a hand light, a duralloy utility knife, a signal mirror. "More and better will come later. Now load up. The trip will be new for you, and unpleasant, but endure it boldly as a Bortok warrior should."

Ensign Conners, the pilot, showed the Bortoks how to strap in to the auxiliary jumpseats. He then handed out strips of bright safety-orange cloth, brought from the *Richthofen*, for the Bortoks to wear. As he did, Straker stripped to his skinsuit and mounted his Jackhammer again, feeling the welcome rush of expanded consciousness as he brainlinked.

"You have the mission plan?" he asked Conners.

"Got it, sir."

"Remember, this is about impressing the locals more than shooting stuff."

"Aye aye, sir."

The Marksman took off and skimmed the surface, flying low. An hour later, it approached the temple at the wall.

The temple seemed puny to Straker, but was no doubt impressive to the locals. It was set with its back against the diz-wall, was made of stone and

wood, and could probably hold several hundred within its confines. Half-finished outbuildings and fortifications demonstrated the rapid growth of the complex. Atop it, a spire of sorts climbed the wall. A system of ropes and pulleys hung down from the wall's top to the spire, allowing commerce and trade.

"Set down right in front. Don't crush anyone, and stay in the link," Straker said.

"Aye aye, sir."

Conners set the Marksman down facing the temple, fifty meters from the nearest building. Workers scurried away like ants while Bortok warriors gathered, trying to appear brave. When the jet wash and dust abated, the warriors advanced cautiously.

"Open the loading doors," Straker said.

The doors swung wide and the Mak Deen led fifty Bortoks out to face the temple warriors. They marched directly toward the temple, and the locals, after wavering, moved aside.

With his allied Bortoks out of the way, Straker walked his Jackhammer out the doors and stood like a seven-meter metal god, facing the temple. He'd set the smart paint to give him highlights of bright orange, the color of the Derekite movement.

Everyone except his own men stopped to stare.

The Mak Deen and his warriors drove the merchants out of the temple, using the hafts or flats of their weapons, or bashing them with shields. Most were Bortok priests or civilians, but some were various sorts of humans, who must have come here over the wall.

A hue and cry interrupted the process at one building, and Straker saw the Mak Deen's forces recoil, shields up. Twenty Bortok warriors with distinctive black-and-yellow decorations on their shields rushed out of the building to attack.

"To me!" the Mak Deen roared, calling his scattered men to himself. The enemy warriors rushed at him in a mass.

Straker aimed a gatling and fired three rounds. The bullets, each the size of a Bortok finger, ripped apart three attacking warriors. Where they struck the ground, they threw up bursts of dirt so powerful they knocked down several more. The resulting confusion shocked and delayed them enough for the Mak Deen to gather a dozen warriors and attack the shaken enemy.

Nazeer, head and shoulders above even the other Bortoks, crashed into his foes like they were children, knocking them aside and crushing them with powerful blows of his war-mace. Katog and other warriors waded into battle alongside their leader.

It was over in mere seconds.

A few minutes of searching saw the priests rounded up and brought into the courtyard at the fore of the temple. Straker stood on overwatch, letting Nazeer handle them as per the plan while he checked the top of the wall for snipers or other threats.

A squad of uniformed, human-standard security forces appeared above, carrying weapons. Before they could even aim them, Straker fired a low-powered force-cannon jet into them—weak compared to its usual antitank function, but still powerful enough to instantly incinerate human flesh. Several security personnel burst into flame. A powerpack from one of their weapons blew, and two fell to their deaths, screaming.

After that, there was no more trouble.

Straker had wondered whether it was security forces or Derekites who'd managed the trade from the other side of the wall. Derekites might have made sense, as they'd have wanted to undermine the status quo that kept the dizzes separate and functioning according to plan.

As it turned out, though, the security forces—the agents who enforced the will of the Opters—must have been trying to undermine the Mak Deen's influence. They'd be trying to break up Bortok unity and send them back to the usual endless warring among themselves and the other groups in that diz. That would keep them subservient to the Opters.

Divide and rule was the Opter way.

With his SAI scanning for threats, Straker turned his attention back to Nazeer and the priests.

"This temple is an abomination," the Mak Deen said. "The holy writings forbid Bortoks to build houses, that our hearts may always stay on the grasslands and serve Ullach."

A Bortok—his golden robes were more ornate than the others and indicated he was high priest—stepped forward importantly. "This temple is no house, and so those holy words do not apply, O mighty Mak Deen," he said. "As you say, your heart is on the grasslands. With respect, I bid you return there and leave us to do the work of Ullach."

“If this is Ullach’s work, why would Ullach let me come here to threaten it?” the Mak Deen said.

“Ullach allows misfortunes as tests of faith. He may even allow his Mak Deen to stray.”

“Yet surely Ullach would not allow his temple to be destroyed?”

The high priest paused, choosing his words with care. “In the end, all happens according to the will of Ullach, but for a time he allows Shaytan to oppose him, so that all may choose between good and evil. Shaytan is whispering in your ear, O mighty Mak Deen. I beg you not to listen.”

Clever, Straker thought. This priest would out-talk Nazeer if he wasn’t careful. Words were the priests’ home turf, and the Mak Deen couldn’t just chop the guy’s head off. This was a battle of hearts and minds.

But there were other ways to sway hearts and minds. Straker decided to move the plan forward. He raised an arm and loosed a bolt of plasma at the spire, where it rose from the temple roof. The jet undercut the spire, which came crashing down.

“Listen to the words of the Mak Deen,” Straker thundered through his external speakers. “He is the Guided One of Ullach, a warrior of warriors. It is the priests who have become debased, money-grubbing thieves. I, the Azaltar Derek, confirm this.”

Then he strode forward, taking care not to kick or stomp anyone, and burst through the tall closed doors of the temple. They flew off their hinges to crash flat on the floor inside. Straker used his gauntlets to punch holes in the walls. Stones and timber fell atop him, but the duralloy shrugged everything off with hardly a scratch.

He took care not to damage the Mother Stone, a rough cube of crimson rock, about five meters on a side, sitting in the center of the space. Rather, he walked over to shield it from falling debris, which he batted out of the way even as he fired low-power plasma bolts to weaken and demolish the structure.

Five minutes later, he stood in the center of a ruin, next to the undamaged Mother Stone. All who remained in the area gathered to see. Many bowed down in prayer, though whether to the stone or to him, Straker didn’t know.

Straker opened the mechsuit chest plates, showing himself to the awestruck crowd. “Get up! Get up! I am the Azaltar!” he said, loudly. “I am not Shaytan, or any god, only a man using a machine to do the will of

Ullach! Too long have the priests stood between the people and Ullach. Too long have the priests dipped their hands into your pockets with every trade. I have destroyed this temple to show you the error of their ways. I will now break a hole in the Wall of the World, so that all who inhabit here, Bortoks and other peoples, will not be confined. Humankind is not meant to be kept in prisons of inhuman making.”

The crowd of hundreds cheered, at first hesitantly, and then more enthusiastically. Soon, all were on their feet.

Straker dismounted to stand on the feet of his mechsuit. This allowed the Mak Deen to meet him at eye level and clasp hands. “It’s all yours, brother,” Straker said. “You will send out your warriors as we discussed?”

“I will send the word, Azaltar, to explore, to conquer our enemies, and to respect all our allies who wear the orange.”

“Excellent. I’ll now take my leave. Give my regards to your sister.”

“Your goodbyes, you mean.”

“Perhaps. Probably... I don’t love her, but... I admire her. Farewell, Mak Deen.”

“Farewell, Liberator.”

With that, Straker remounted and closed up the chest plates. He strode back to the Marksman. His work here was done, and every hour was valuable. “You ready, Conners?”

“Ready, sir.”

Straker clamped in and the dropship rose. He ran his targeting reticle along the wall five hundred meters to the south, until he found a space with nobody there, and specified the target for the Marksman. “Start with some laser fire, just enough to punch a few holes. Give the civilians a chance to evacuate, and see what the security forces do.”

Conners peppered the wall with laser fire, setting off fire alarms and sirens. He didn’t lift the dropship above the wall for fear of exposing it to some kind of heavier weapon within the next diz, so Straker had no idea what was happening on the other side.

After five minutes, Straker decided he’d given everyone a fair chance to run. “Go ahead, Ensign. Blow it down.”

Conners tilted the Marksman, hovering by brute force on thrusters, and fired the dropship’s railgun at the base of the wall. The weapon, designed to kill the largest tanks and blow holes in bunkers, ripped through the wall with ease. A jagged gap the size of a vehicle door appeared.

“Drop me, and then widen that hole with the lasers,” Straker said. A moment later, the bay doors beneath his feet opened and the clamps released him.

He landed lightly on drop jets and walked unhurriedly toward the breach in the wall. The dropship used its lasers to slice away pieces, rapidly widening the hole and the crude tunnel the railgun bullet had created.

When he could see all the way through to the other side, Straker called a halt to the lasers and walked in, weapons ready. Nothing inside the thirty-meter deep wall threatened him, so he used brute force to clear a level, straight path through for the warriors who would follow.

“Okay, Conners, give me some top cover.” Straker stepped out the other side.

An armored security car slashed a light laser across his chest. Its minor sting told Straker of its weakness without checking the numbers. Instinctively, he aimed and fired a three-round gatling burst that punched straight through the vehicle, wrecking it. His SAI scanned for others, but found no threats greater than police with slugthrowers.

Those rapidly retreated out of sight.

“I got air-cars approaching from the east, two clicks,” Conners said. “What are these guys thinking? They’re civilian grade, meat for our weapons, sir.”

“They’re doing their jobs, like all good soldiers,” Straker replied. “Young, loyal, and they think they’re immortal. Kinda like you.”

“But I *am* immortal.”

“Talk to me when you turn thirty.”

“Okay, grandpa. Sir, I mean.”

Straker rolled his eyes. Aerospace pilots. “Zap them with your lasers, just enough to put their aircars out of action but give them a chance to survive.”

“Roger that, sir.” The Marksman’s lasers, mere point defenses by orbital standards, easily lanced across the two kilometers. The aircars crashed.

“Targets neutralized.”

“Anything else dangerous?”

“The recon net says no, nothing heavier than aircars.”

“Then pick me up and let’s go make some more breaches.”

Straker rode the Marksman northward along the wall. Together, they blew holes and carved pathways through it every hundred kilometers or so,

until they'd made nine more breaches. By that time, despite a stim, Straker was exhausted, and he knew his pilot was getting tired. He called for other dropship-mechsuit teams to finish the job, punching more holes in the walls of the diz to let the Bortoks out in all directions.

"Okay, Ensign, take us back up to the *Richthofen*."

"With pleasure, sir."

The Marksman raced heavenward, skimming along the outside of the ring until it broke away to cross the short distance to its mother ship parked in orbit above. When they landed on the flight deck, Straker walked his Jackhammer into a service bay and gratefully dismounted.

Commander Sinden met Straker at the flight deck entrance. "Sir, I need to speak to you about something."

Straker restrained a snarky comment about how respectful she was now that she'd been promoted. He chose to believe she was accepting the situation and acting correctly, rather than just sucking up.

Then again, she *had* claimed she was a high-functioning sociopath. He'd have to keep an eye on her.

"Did you run it through your chain of command?"

"Captain Smits is too busy."

"And I'm not?" Straker snapped his fingers. "He didn't listen, right?"

"He listened, but he didn't..."

"Didn't like what you had to say? You're close to the line here, Sinden. What's this about?"

Sinden opened a door into a half-empty parts storage room and led him in. "Call it me seeing the admiral on his open-door policy."

"Okay. You got two minutes, because I'm beat."

Sinden spoke rapidly. "Look, sir, we almost have the planet. Your Bortoks are already spreading out and my socio-statistical analysis says that will push the population over the edge as the security forces crumble and defect. We own the orbital space, except what's over the poles—but that's a big if. The polar strongholds are a cancer that we have to eliminate."

"Yeah, obviously. What did Smits say?"

"He said don't worry about it for now."

"For now?"

"He wants to drop asteroids on them. It's the safe method as far as risk of casualties go, but they're weeks out. Anything could happen in the meantime. Besides, impacts big enough to crater the forts will also screw

with the ecosystem. Years of winter, caused by untold amounts of material thrown into the air. Disruption of weather patterns, which we can't control because the ring systems took a lot of damage in the takeover. We can't afford the crop failures, or the loss of solar energy for years. There are too many people on this planet as it is. Lose even a little capacity, and we'll have famine and starvation. Billions will die, and the people will want to go back to the good old days of Opter rule."

Straker crossed his arms. "That's the problem. What's your solution?"

"There's a world-spanning tunnel system inside the planet. Gravity trains. I've never seen anyone actually build them before, but the idea is as old as the internal combustion engine. They run to the forts, among other places."

"You want to attack the strongholds from below?"

"Yes. The tunnels are thousands of kilometers long, completely evacuated of air so their maglev trains can reach thousands of KPH. You can go from one side to the other through the planet's core in less than an hour."

Straker put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. "Fine. Develop a plan with options. Put together a briefing. How soon can you have it ready?"

"Twelve hours."

He let go and checked his chrono. "Great. It's—gods and monsters, it's 0230 already. Schedule the main conference room for 1500."

"Thank you, sir." Sinden bolted out of the room.

Straker shrugged and followed more slowly. As the saying went, let the best horses run. As long as they didn't stumble.

Speaking of stumbling... Straker plodded to his stateroom and stumbled into his bunk.

Chapter 24

ERS *Richthofen*, Terra Nova orbit

Straker arrived at the *Richthofen*'s briefing room at 1500 sharp.

He'd long since learned the boss should never be early, because sometimes the briefing officer needed every moment to set up—and showing up early might make subordinates seem late, which would cause everyone to worry more and show up even earlier, leading to a vicious please-the-boss cycle all down the line. The admiral says be there at 1500, so the captain says 1430, so the commander says 1400, so the lieutenant says 1330, so the chief says 1300 just to be sure, and all the enlisted people end up wasting two hours twiddling their thumbs and hating everyone above them.

The attendees rose to their feet and Straker waved them to their seats. Captain Smits sat stiffly, a sour look on his face. Straker took his seat and sipped his caff, just to break the tension, and waved his other hand casually as if to say, *carry on*.

Commander Sinden, in a pin-perfect dress uniform, led the briefing. Multiple displays showed the planet from various angles and scales. "Good afternoon, Admiral. First I'd like to review the status of our conquest."

"*Liberation*, Commander. These people want to be free. They're not our subjects."

"Yes, of course. Our *liberation*. We have ninety-one percent of the surface and ninety-four percent of the populace liberated already. Section by section, it looks like—"

"Skip that, Nancy. Jump to the part about the polar forts."

Sinden blinked, accessing her brainlink, and the displays changed to show a translucent interior view of the planet of Terra Nova. A hologram sprang into existence above the table.

"There are sixty-four major tunnels leading to positions on the surface," Sinden said. "They all cross near the core—actually they don't cross, but rather they enter a frictionless interchange that keeps them moving, losing very little energy, rather like a ship slingshotting around a planet."

"So there's some kind of traffic control system?"

"There is, sir."

"And we control it?"

Sinden squirmed. “Most of it.”

“Do the forts control any of it?”

“Just at their ends.”

“So they’ll see us coming... How do we sneak up on them?”

“Ah—that’s the one thing I haven’t worked out yet.”

Captain Smits cleared his throat. “I think we’ve seen about enough, *Commander*.” He spoke the last word with a sneer. No doubt he didn’t agree with her being promoted at Straker’s order.

Sinden opened her mouth as if to argue, then shut with an audible click and waited, her eyes avoiding both her bosses.

Straker didn’t rescue her right away. Sinden had jumped the chain of command to approach him as if she had a brilliant solution. Now, it seemed she’d been premature about the whole thing. He let her squirm as he stared at the hologram.

Still, the general plan had merit.

Something tugged at his thoughts. An idea began to form. “Where’s Zaxby?”

The others present glanced around as if the Ruxin would somehow materialize from under a chair.

“Somebody find him.”

“On my way, Admiral,” Zaxby’s voice came from the PA system. “Two minutes.”

Smits huffed, Sinden tried to look small, and Straker chuckled and said, “He’s got the SAI listening for any mention of his name, I bet.”

When Zaxby locomoted into the room, Straker said, “How precise can you be with your skimmer?”

“The *Darter*? Very precise indeed.”

“Can you drop an object off within half a meter of a known position after diving into underspace from two thousand kilometers away?”

“I can.”

“Even if the location is inside a moving planet?”

Zaxby’s eyes juggled, seeming to cross momentarily. Two of them focused on the hologram. Two others aimed themselves at Straker. Then all four seemed to glance around at the others in the room. “You want me to save the day again?”

“I want you to do what you’re good at, Zaxby.”

“That doesn’t narrow things down enough, Admiral Straker. I’m good at everything.”

“Except humility,” Straker sighed. “Being smart, being accurate, and doing the unexpected. Does that narrow it down enough?”

“A great deal, but not—”

“You’re in charge of the only underspace-capable ship in the system—the *Darter*.” Straker reached into the hologram with his fingertip, indicating a spot under one of the forts, the one at the south pole. “I want you to drop me off right here.”

“That’s very dangerous. You’ve already been exposed twice to emergence from underspace within an atmosphere. Every time you do increases the risk of brain damage and death.”

“Good to know... but this may not be in atmo. The gravity train tunnels are airless vacuum. As long as you’re precise enough...”

“You? Not a warhead? Why not simply destroy the stronghold from below?”

Straker fiddled with his cup. “We could, but every asset we liberate is one we get to keep and use to defend the planet later. I don’t like destroying things if I can capture them instead.”

Zaxby spun the hologram-globe with a tentacle and expanded it to show the detail. “The tunnels are barely large enough for a mechsuit, and they’re too small for the *Darter* to emerge. I’m not certain I can be precise enough to place you so the edge of your mechsuit won’t emerge within a wall. That would be catastrophic.”

Commander Sinden smiled. “What? You’re not perfect?”

Zaxby rolled an eye toward her. “As with most humans, I like you better when you don’t talk. However, if you must babble, explain to the admiral that if I can’t do it, *nobody* can. A bomb is simpler and far more sure. Besides, a mechsuit won’t fit into the *Darter*’s float mine tubes without physical modifications I’d rather not make.”

Sinden pressed her lips together in irritation, and then nodded sharply to Straker. “The Ruxin is right in this case. A warhead makes much more sense.”

Zaxby continued in a smug tone. “And, there’s no reason to risk the person of the Liberator further. If you insist on such a mad scheme, you have twenty-six other, less valuable mechsuiters to choose from.”

“I’m not going to order people to do anything I won’t do myself,” Straker said.

“The whole idea is idiotic,” Zaxby said. “Because you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail.”

“I have a Jackhammer, you mean.”

“Precisely—and I’d already noted the wordplay. My amusement was short-lived compared to my concern that you’re determined to kill yourself—not that I myself care. Carla Engels, however, would be devastated to lose the father of her child.”

That brought Straker up short. He rolled his neck and shoulders to ease his urge to break something. “Okay. Not a mechsuit. Too big and unwieldy, probably end up trashing the place anyway. How about a special op? A picked team of Breakers in battlesuits. We sneak in, breach and take them down.”

Zaxby considered. “Better... Much better, with far more room for variance. It’s unfortunate we do not have two underspace-capable ships. However, my highly evolved mind has already come up with a solution. The Breaker team can hit one pole, while a team of Derekite agents can hit the other pole, timed simultaneously. The Derekites can insert covertly via a train, claiming to be loyalists escaping from the liberation. They can bring along a fusion bomb and use it if they must.”

Straker glanced around the room. Smits gave him a cautious nod, as did Sinden. The rest held their breath. “Okay, Zaxby, I like your plan. Work with Commander Sinden on the intel, and Heiser on the spec ops team selection. I’ll talk to Loco and Julius myself.”

Zaxby saluted him with the tip of a tentacle. “Aye aye, Liberator Derek, sir.”

“I’m never sure whether you’re serious,” Straker grumbled as he stood to walk out, caff in hand.

“Neither am I,” Zaxby replied.

“You know, you’ve become even more mouthy since you became a male.”

“I know. Isn’t it fun?”

“For you, maybe. Now, get working.”

Straker returned to his quarters and cracked a beer. The sweet-bitter taste reminded him of Loco, so he comlinked him first. “Where you at, Killer?”

“Just cleaned out a regional security center that Auburn spotted,” Loco replied. “Big pyramid building, designed to awe everybody into being good little humanopts. Those miners did really good work in the underground, by the way. You should give them all medals.”

“Do we have medals yet?”

“I’m sure the replication techs can print up a batch.”

Straker chuckled. “Give me enough ribbon and I shall conquer the world.”

“Sun Tzu?”

“Napoleon. Speaking of the miners, tell Auburn I need two of his best explosives techs for a special op. Coordinate with Heiser. He should’ve already gotten the word to pick a team.”

“Sure, boss. Where’re we going?”

“*You’re* not going anywhere, General Paloco. You have responsibilities.”

“And you don’t? You ain’t leaving me behind. I’m getting tired of romping around trying *not* to kill these pathetic security goobers. The only real challenge we had was those Opters in the ring.”

Straker considered. “I guess I could put Major Adler in overall charge.”

“Good idea. Promote him to Colonel, too.”

“Now *that’s* a good idea. I’ll let him know. Come back to the *Richthofen*. We’ll prep and launch from here.”

“Okay boss, see you soon.”

After briefing Adler of his promotion and temporary command of all the ground forces, Straker told the comms center to hunt down the agent Julius and put him through. It took the rest of his beer and part of the next before the humanopt came on the comlink.

“Yes, Liberator. What can I do for you?”

“Looks like you’ve won, except for those polar forts. You getting everything you need from us?”

“Everything we could reasonably hope for, Liberator. On behalf of all the Derekites, and the people of Terra Nova, I thank you for your assistance.”

“Happy to give it. You and the rest of the people here will have to work out how to govern yourselves, though. That’s not my job. More urgently, we still have a war to fight. That means taking down those polar forts and rebuilding your defenses.”

Julius paused. “We’re aware of the forts, but they’ll be difficult to take.”

“I have a plan to take one of them, but you’ll have to take the other. Do you think you can convince one fort that a group of loyalists is retreating there, and then seize it?”

“Difficult, but possible. I suggest we try for the north polar fort, and you the south. I know the commander in the north. She was sent there as punishment for poor performance, so perhaps will not be as vigilant against a trick infiltration.”

“How long do you need to organize?” Straker asked.

“Give us at least six hours.”

“Okay. Coordinate with Commander Sinden for the details. I’ll be leading the attack on the south fort, and we’ll kick that off simultaneously with your op. Straker out.”

Next, Straker checked with Sinden and told her the Derekites needed at least six hours. She set the attack for 0100, in about nine hours.

And every hour counted. Nine hours gave Straker just enough time for one more very important trip. It might be hurried, but he wanted to make it just in case...in case he didn’t make it back from the polar mission.

He called Conners and told him to prep his Marksman, and then met with Lieutenant Kanagawa at the sensor control center, to search for and pinpoint something—perhaps someone—on the surface. By the time Straker dressed in outdoor clothing and strapped on an equipment vest, Conners was ready, and Straker left immediately. He wished he had another chainmail shirt, but didn’t regret giving it away to Toryak. That type of thing gained a lot of goodwill and grew legends. Straker would have to make do with his innate speed this time, along with a combat knife and a slugthrower pistol, but he didn’t expect to do any fighting.

Besides, he’d have the Marksman.

He rode in the cockpit next to Conners, enjoying the magnificent view through the wide, clear ports. The world-spanning ring was abuzz with activity, and Straker could see hundreds of small craft shuttling here and there as floating repair platforms hovered, doing their work.

Twenty minutes later, Conners set them down in a high mountain meadow, ringed by jagged rocks. Snow and ice still lurked in the shadows of the slabs. Thin ribbons of smoke marked a village of stone huts at one end of the green, and Straker could see some goatlike animals penned there.

Straker strode off the dropship and into a chill breeze. The altitude here topped three thousand meters, and the atmosphere was thin. He walked toward the ring of huts, noting that they were bigger than he'd thought. Each might house ten or twenty people in a pinch, yet he saw no one.

Until one man stepped out of a structure. He was tall, wore ragged Calarian colors, and carried a sword. Slowly, deliberately, the man approached Straker.

"Drake," Straker said.

"King Drake," the man said bitterly, "though not king of much."

"I'm sorry about that."

Drake drew his sword, swiftly, and Straker danced out of reach, drawing his slugthrower and his knife. Drake was far too deadly to try to disarm with his bare hands.

"I should kill you for what you did, Straker," Drake said.

"What did I do?"

"You abandoned us to the Bortoks."

"Seems like you wished me gone. You sure wanted Roslyn to yourself."

Drake's sword wavered, and then dropped. "I suppose I did. But Roslyn wanted you."

"She had all she wanted from me, I think. Even if I'd stayed, do you believe I could have stopped the Bortoks?"

"We'll never know, will we?"

"Drake, what's done is done. You don't have to like me, but you need to listen to me. You're king now, so you need to do what's best for your people."

"My people." Drake looked away. "A few thousand refugees of a once-proud race, scattered across the mountaintops, hiding like bandits. We'll never be able to drive the Bortoks from our lands."

"What if I told you the Bortoks would give you your lands back and live in peace with the Calaria?"

Drake burst out laughing. "You're mad."

"I'm not. This whole thing was a mistake. Remember the parlay where Prince Florden was killed at the truce talks?"

"Of course."

"The Bortoks didn't backstab the Calaria. The Magic Men murdered everyone, and then disappeared. They're agents of the Opters, the insectoids who want to keep humans fighting among themselves. They killed the

Bortoks too, including the Mak Deen's father. That's why the Bortoks were so implacable. They thought your people did it."

Drake turned his back, breathing deeply, and then slammed his sword into its sheath. "Can this be true?" he said, looking up at the blue sky and the world-ring above.

Straker slowly holstered his weapons. "It's true. I give you my word. I've spoken with the Mak Deen. He's pledged to give you back your lands. It cost me something to arrange that, so I really need you to agree."

Drake turned to face Straker again, hope on his face. He looked over Straker's shoulder at the dropship. "You truly are the Azaltar, to command such a ship of the air. I thought you were a charlatan—a strong, clever one, of course, but I never believed your claims were true. Do men truly live among the stars, as Gorben says?"

"They do. Someday I hope your people will travel to them, for your world is now free. But they may still need your strong arm, because the war's not over yet. The Opters may try to reclaim this world, so you must not only make peace with the Bortoks, but ally with them as well. Can you do that?"

Drake looked at his clawed hand. "I've killed many Bortoks. Hundreds. Will they put the past aside?"

"If you can, I think they will. Both peoples have suffered great harm, but now is the time to move forward together."

"I must consider this. Alone." Drake turned and strode to the edge of the plateau. He stood gazing down at the lowlands while Straker stuck his comlink into his ear and drew away to catch up on the situation.

Eventually Drake returned. "I'll do it, if you're certain the Bortoks are in earnest."

Straker was pleased and smiled. "They are. Ah, one more thing. I need to see Roslyn and my child."

Drake's face turned bleak and wary. "I will get her."

"And my child? Is it a son or a daughter?"

Drake didn't answer, only turned his back on Straker and walked toward the village.

Straker followed, running to catch up with the tall Calarian's stride. When the two men approached the huts, shutters opened and people stepped out of doorways, watching silently. Where before he'd been cheered, now

the Calaria only watched, perhaps apprehensively sensing momentous changes once more.

Inside the largest of the huts Roslyn waited. She stood, her hands clenched together, within the simple open room that formed the crude, barn-like building. Her face was blank, or perhaps pained. It was hard to tell in the light that reached through the small windows.

“How far we’ve fallen, while you rise,” she said bitterly as Straker stopped in front of her. “I was a fool to let you go.”

“Like I told Drake, there’s no guarantee I could have helped if I’d have stayed. It took a lot of luck to get home. Life is full of chance. Sometimes it sucks—it’s miserable and difficult, that means. I’m here now, though.”

Drake spoke up. “The Azaltar has arranged peace with the Bortoks. We will have our lands back.”

“You have power indeed.” Roslyn smiled suddenly, changing her attitude like she changed a cloak. She swayed forward, reaching toward him. “Yes, I was a fool to let you go.”

Straker grabbed her wrists before she could embrace him. “Stop with your games, Roslyn. I don’t want you. I never did—and you don’t need to persuade me to help your people. I only want one thing now—to see my child.”

Roslyn jerked her hands loose and smoothed her tunic. “I’m sorry. I can’t do that.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s gone.”

“It? Is it a son or daughter?”

“Neither.”

“Neither? How can it be neither?”

“Because it’s dead.”

Chapter 25

High mountains, with the remnant of the Calaria, Terra Nova

Straker wanted to grab Roslyn and shake her when she told him their child was dead, but he mastered himself. “Explain. What happened?”

“I barely survived the fighting at High Tollen. Once they broke our defenses, the Bortoks butchered us. Drake and I and a core of knights fought a rearguard action to save what we could and escape to the high passes where the Bortoks hate to go. For three long days we fought—with no food, little water, and even less hope. I was bruised and exhausted. On the third day, I miscarried. What came out of me was too small to know its sex.”

Angry, Straker turned to Drake. “What kind of bullshit is this?”

“Bull-shit?”

“Lies, stories, half-truths. I can’t believe anything this woman says, but I trust you. Is my child dead?”

Drake nodded slowly. “I’m sorry. I truly am.”

Straker turned away. He felt as if he’d been kicked in the stomach. He’d been looking forward to seeing his child, no matter what its origins or circumstances.

Now, that was all snatched away. He told himself he should be relieved. Roslyn’s trick to get pregnant and hold the resulting offspring hostage had failed, and now he didn’t need to explain to Carla why he had a kid by another woman.

Instead, it was as if his guts had been ripped out. He felt Drake’s hand on his shoulder, and didn’t shake it off.

“I’m sorry too, Derek,” Roslyn said.

Straker took a deep breath and turned to Roslyn again. “And I’m sorry—sorry this all happened, sorry you are who you are, sorry you drugged and seduced me, sorry we created a life that died. But I’m not apologizing for anything I did. If I’d never shown up, the Bortoks would’ve overrun you anyway.” He punched his fist into his palm. “I can’t be everywhere and I can’t control everything. Shit happens.” He knew he was trying to convince himself, not her.

“Shit happens...” Roslyn echoed hollowly. “The past is past.”

Straker sighed, feeling defeated and sick. "I'm done here. Drake, walk me out."

Drake accompanied him past the staring people to the dropship, where they stopped. "What will you do?" Drake asked.

"What I have to. Fight my war. My people are under attack."

"Yet you came here."

"I was selfish. I wanted to see my child."

"Any man would do the same."

"I also came here to enlist the people of this planet in my war. To divert my enemies. I'm using you. That's even more selfish."

"A king must do what's best for his own people—not for others."

"I'm no king."

"You look like one from where I'm standing."

"Looks can be deceiving."

Drake took a deep breath, spread his hands helplessly. They stood for a time that way, each staring past each other, not knowing what to say.

Eventually Drake broke the silence. "We must say goodbye, Azaltar."

"Call me Derek, or Straker. Everyone else does."

Drake smiled wanly. "Derek. Drake. Two kings, both miserable. Not so different."

"Guess not." Straker clasped Drake's hand. "You might be the better man."

"A pointless argument. I suppose I'll need to be, to handle Roslyn."

That made Straker laugh. "Apparently I'm a horrible judge of character."

"Why do you say?"

"Because when I first met each of you, I thought Roslyn was honorable and straightforward, and you were underhanded and treacherous."

Drake shrugged. "We are what we are, but it's not always obvious. We make mistakes. Such is life."

Straker struggled to shove his depression aside, concentrating on the facts and the job in front of him. "If you approach the Bortoks under flag of truce you should have no problems. Everything's changing now, and the Mak Deen's not a bad guy. He's honorable, and he spoke well of you. Did you know you're much admired by your enemies?"

"Feared, perhaps, though they'd never admit it."

“No, really—admired. The Bortoks love a fighter, even if he’s on the other side.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Do that.” Straker raised his palm in farewell. “So long.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means *see you later*. It may be a while. I have a lot more war to fight, to put the Opters back in their place.”

“I’m sorry I can’t give you warriors, but we are so few...”

“No worries. It’s time for you to be a king now, not a warrior.”

“And when is your time to lay aside the sword, Azaltar?”

Straker took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “That’s a damn fine question. Not yet, I guess.”

With that, he boarded the dropship.

Straker rode in the back this time, his eyes closed, thinking. The child he believed he had here, a subject that had occupied his thoughts for the better part of a year, turned out to be a mirage.

Then he started to wonder. Could the whole thing have been a trick, a ploy between Roslyn and Gorben to try to bind Straker to the Calaria? Gorben told him Roslyn carried his child just before he pushed him into the river. What better way to get the Azaltar to come back? Even Drake wouldn’t know.

It hardly mattered now. As Roslyn had said, the past is past. The Calaria would make their own way. He didn’t owe them anything.

Besides, he had a new woman problem—Zurenia, and Carla’s reaction. If he was lucky, the tryst wouldn’t take, and he’d never have sex with her again. If he was really lucky, he could convince the Mak Deen to annul the marriage after a while, especially if the Bortoks’ circumstances changed enough. They’d be busy exploring the adjoining dizzes and trying to find their place in the new world of technology and modernity.

In other words, maybe Nazeer would let him off the hook.

The landing on the *Richthofen*’s flight deck jarred him out of his thoughts and sparked new ones. He checked his chrono. Seven hours until the op kicked off. He found Loco, Heiser and a dozen Breakers in one of the vehicle bays, planning and rehearsing to take the polar fortress.

Auburn and one other miner were there, a woman. Straker shook the foreman’s hand. “Great job against the Skinners,” he said.

“We did our part, but the fur people did most of the work and got the most killed. That was some vicious fighting. I don’t think they took many Skinner prisoners.”

“Can’t blame them, the way they’ve been treated.”

“Then your Breakers led the takedown of that security pyramid. Those battlesuiters, and Loco in that mechsuit—damn, that made us miners feel like amateurs.”

“Everyone has his specialty. We couldn’t have done it without yours.”

“Thanks,” Auburn said. He turned to the woman next to him. “This is Shiela Van Doren, my best boomer.”

“Boomer?”

Auburn mimed an explosion. “Boom! Demolitions.”

“Right.” Straker shook the woman’s hand. She was another heavy-worlder, with a grip like a vise. “Nice to meet you.”

She smiled a gap-toothed smile. “Likewise, Liberator.”

“So, where’s your other boomer?”

Auburn grinned and hooked a thumb at himself. “Yours truly.”

“You sure you’re not just trying to get in on the action?”

“Who, me? No, you asked for my best two boomers, and we’re it. You want my third-best? I can always go back down to the surface. Got plenty of work to do.”

Straker gazed at the wide man for a moment, wondering if his first taste of combat had made him an adrenaline junkie. That happened to a few soldiers, especially when their first action went well, like gamblers who win big at their first visit to the tables. “No. You’re the expert. Carry on.”

By the time to load into the *Darter*, Straker was confident in the plan. Like all the Breakers, he’d donned his battlesuit. They’d ended up with only nine—Straker, Loco, Heiser and six other battlesuiters. The two miners were in rock suits—not armored for war, but heavy-duty models designed to keep them alive in the roughest conditions.

“Launching,” Zaxby said. The skimmer floated gently off the flight deck and out into space. Its interior had been drained, if not dried, from its usual water-soaked state in order to accommodate the humans.

After several minutes of no maneuvering, Straker keyed his comlink. “What’s the holdup, Zaxby?”

“First, I’m waiting for confirmation the Derekite mission made it through the interchange and is on its way to the north pole with its approach

permissions intact. Second, the longer my sensors have to calibrate, the more precise we'll be in our drop. It's not easy, as I'll have to continuously match the rotation of the planet in three vectors." Zaxby paused. "You do know that we are relying entirely on unconfirmed information. If the reported position of the tunnel is off by more than a meter, you may all die."

"The plans were precise, right?"

"Precise, yes... but accurate? That's unverified. It's possible to be precise, yet completely wrong."

"We know the risks."

Eventually, the comlink beeped. "I have confirmation the Derekite train is approaching the north pole," Zaxby said. "Underspace dive in three, two, one, *mark*."

Straker felt the sudden chill. He didn't turn up his heater. The trip would be short. Within seconds, the *Darter* was flying through the planet itself in underspace, marked only by a point of congruency with normal space.

A few seconds later, Zaxby announced, "Drop in one minute. Prepare yourselves."

The eleven infiltrators unbuckled their harnesses and stood. They faced forward and shuffled toward the open drop tube. Its autoloading mechanism that normally transferred float mines from the magazine to the launcher had been removed, allowing direct access.

With its hatch open, the tube looked like a cylindrical metal pit in the floor. Its bottom hatch slid aside and Straker, first in line, now gazed down into the strange black void of underspace. Spacers' tales said that you could go insane if you stared at it long enough, but to Straker it only looked like liquid darkness held back by the protective field generators.

The darkness retreated and turned whitish. Zaxby'd explained that meant the field was extending itself into normal space like a periscope rising from the sea, thinning the barrier to nothing. Straker stared at the drop light affixed to the bulkhead. When it turned green, he stepped into the tube.

The polarized gravplating yanked him downward. He felt an instant of intense cold, and then he popped out into a dim tunnel and fell to its floor. Here at the cargo dock, the passageway was flat and horizontal for ease of loading.

Fortunately, all was quiet—there was no train at the station. One hurdle passed.

Loco hit the floor next to him, and then Heiser, Auburn, and Van Doren. Straker held his breath as he watched the rest of the battlesuiters pop into existence above the floor, their exit points coming closer and closer to the tunnel wall.

The last man didn't make it. He emerged partly in the concrete itself. The molecular interaction created intense heat, so he died almost instantly as his battlesuit slagged and ignited. Its batteries and capacitors released their energy as well, and Straker's faceplate auto-dimmed to compensate. Alarms flashed.

"That's torn it," Loco snapped. "They'll be alerted and have eyes on this area. Get moving!"

Straker leaped up and raced for the cargo bay door, firing his blaster as he ran. The others did the same, and the thin metal vanished in a storm of hot plasma.

Inside the empty cargo bay, which was a spacious area intended for offloading and handling of the fortress's supplies, Straker destroyed the surveillance vidcams. He waved the boomers to the main loading lift. "Get it open!"

While they worked on the lift, Straker found the auxiliary stairs. He sent two Breakers up it in hopes of catching the defenders flatfooted. They raced upward three floors to the top of the stairs. "It's locked. Blast it open," one said.

A flurry of shots followed, and then Straker heard, "Crossfire, crossfire. They've got the door covered. Prepping grenades."

Explosions shook the stairway. "No joy. They're entrenched. Maybe an autogun."

Straker let out a string of vulgarities and said, "I'm taking the crawlspace. Auburn, keep working on that lift."

"Working." Auburn and Van Doren opened the lift doors and cracked the control panel.

Plan A had been to take control of the lift and send up Breakers to try to break through any defenses, but the two Breakers in the stairwell had already shown that the enemy was alerted and fighting back. Because the lift would debouch near the stairs, anyone inside would run into the same things the others had.

"Prep Plan B," Loco said.

While Auburn bypassed the lift controls, Van Doren prepped Plan B. She slapped shaped charges on the inner lift doors and set other charges at certain places on the walls and doorjambs. When the lift reached its destination, the defenders would get a nasty surprise. The explosion should take out anything within twenty meters. Then, Breakers could climb the lift tube and try to advance through the resulting mess.

Straker stripped off his battlesuit, leaving only his airtight skinsuit, its facemask, and its half-hour reserve oxygen supply. When he'd finished and picked up his blaster, along with a satchel of cutting charges and a belt of grenades, he noticed Loco imitating him.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? You're not part of Plan B!"

"Boss, why do you even argue with me? You think Heiser can't handle one squad? We're the two best shooters on this team, and you're gonna need backup."

"Fine. Watch my back, then."

"Don't I always? Come on." Loco held open a hatch to the maintenance crawlspace.

The crawlspace gap ran through the walls, providing access to the systems at the cargo and passenger stations. The designers hadn't been idiots, of course. The crawlspace didn't connect directly with the fortress above, but Sinden had identified a spot where only a meter of concrete separated it from the fort's own crawlspace.

Straker scrambled fast, his brainlink's internal HUD guiding him unerringly toward the thin spot. Twenty meters back and around a corner, he set down his weapon and grenades. "Stay here," he told Loco.

At the thin spot, he placed the satchel on the floor and laid out the shaped charges. They were self-tamping and unidirectional, so ninety-nine percent of the blast would go into the concrete. Still, what the wall-ripping energy would do after that was unclear. Straker placed all six, reasoning that getting the job done in one go was the lesser risk.

Retreating around the corner, he nodded to Loco and faced away from the set point. "Fire in the hole!"

The shockwave knocked him and Loco to the floor, and the crawlspace filled with smoke and dust. Straker immediately checked the blast site.

"Crap. It's blocked with chunks."

"Cut through or blast again?"

"Blast again. Bring your charges."

Loco brought his charges and they set up another round, this time aiming them to blow the debris out of the way. They did it quick and dirty, and in thirty seconds they again retreated around the corner and set them off.

This time, the amount of debris that flung through the crawlspace, even around the corner, was much greater, peppering the two men with ricochets. Straker grabbed his weapon and grenades and led the way to the blast site again.

Now it was clear enough for Straker and Loco to move into the crawlspace of the fortress itself. They scrambled through the narrow passages on hands and knees, following their HUDs toward the command center itself.

Straker heard pops and pings, and then felt a burning sensation in one leg. "They're firing into the crawlspace!" he barked, redoubling his speed. Like a desperate spider running from a determined housekeeper, he scurried forward. Another shot ricocheted and struck him in the side of his head. His vision swam, and his HUD disappeared. The skinsuit provided a light layer of ballistic armor, but that one had almost taken him out.

"Keep going, boss! I'm right behind you!"

Though half blind, Straker forced himself to keep moving, trying to remember the layout. "Loco, is your HUD still working?"

"Yeah."

"Can you get by me and lead the way?"

"If I have to."

Straker squeezed himself to the side. "Go, go! Haul ass!"

Loco slipped past like an eel, and Straker followed. This earned him another wound in his leg, a laser burn. Holes appeared in the crawlspace. They were probably shooting at the two men by sound and instinct, firing through the walls. Maybe...

Straker grabbed a grenade and pressed its stud. It activated with an audible click. As soon as he released the stud, it would begin its five-second countdown.

He took his thumb off the stud and counted to three. Then he stuffed the sphere through one of the blaster holes. It caught, and he slammed his fist against it. It popped out the other side like a cork from a bottle. "Grenade!" he heard from the other side, but he was already scrambling after Loco.

The blast took some heat off and bought them some time. “Coming up on it,” Loco said thirty seconds later.

“Open the hatch! Room breach drill!”

“Got it.”

When Straker reached the access hatch, Loco swung it open and tossed two grenades through. Straker threw another one through at a different angle. As soon as they blew, he somersaulted into the room.

A bigger blast rattled through the fortress, and Loco fell heavily out of the hatch. The two men leaped to their feet. They found themselves in the control center. The three grenades had killed or incapacitated two humans and an ant-Opter. Straker shot the ant in the head and disarmed the humans, setting them in a corner where he could keep an eye on them.

“Loco, try to make sense of these consoles and get the doors all open. That should work to our advantage.” Straker comlinked Heiser. “We have the control center, but I’m not sure what we can do with it yet.”

“We’re fighting our way toward you, sir,” Heiser said. “We blew up the autogun and some defenders.”

“Speaking of autoguns...” Loco muttered. “I think this is... yeah. Got it, Boss. They’re shut down. Now, if I can get them retargeted...”

“Good idea.”

“Sure wish Zaxby could’ve come along.”

“If he’d been last, he’d be dead inside concrete,” Straker replied. “If he’d been earlier, another guy would be, so...”

“Good point. I think... I... *Aha!*” Loco carefully input a code using one-finger typing. He hit the enter key triumphantly, and then flipped a switch. “There. The autoguns are now set to recognize our IFFs, and I wiped theirs.”

“Woohoo!” came Heiser’s voice on the comlink. “Whatever you did, sir, the autoguns just fucked those guys up, bad!”

“Thank Loco, not me. He hacked their system.”

“Yeah, I am *da man*,” Loco said, putting his feet up on the console and sticking a finger through a hole in one boot. “Ouch. Bastards.”

“Yeah, me too.” Straker indicated his laser-holes. Fortunately, laser wounds were self-cauterizing.

A minute later, Heiser burst into the control center. Auburn followed him, nursing an injured arm.

“Gee, sir, you two look like shit,” Heiser said with a grin. “Nice job on the flanking movement, though.”

That reminded Straker of his other hurts. He could feel blood and dust caking on the side of his head. “I could use some spray-seal and a painkiller,” he said. “Loco too, probably. We lose anyone else?”

“Nobody but Timsen—the one in the wall. Hell of a way to go.”

“Is there a good way to go, Sergeant Major?”

“Yeah—a heart attack on my hundredth birthday, in bed with a naked woman a third my age.”

“Heiser, you’ve been spending far too much time with Loco.”

Heiser shrugged.

“Somebody get me a comlink out,” Straker said.

Heiser took off his gauntlets and sat his suited frame gingerly in a chair, which creaked under his weight. “This looks like comms. Standard layout. These humanopts imitated us on a lot of stuff.”

“Deliberately. The Opters wanted to create their own version of humanity and eventually swamp us with their agents and people,” Straker replied.

“I’ve deactivated the external defenses,” Loco said.

A few moments later, Straker reached Zaxby. “It’s done. What about the other pole?”

“The Derekite mission was successful.”

“Excellent. Send down a lifter to pick us up, and tell the Derekites to come occupy this place too.”

“Already on their way, Admiral. Twenty-five minutes.”

“Good. Straker out.” He stretched out on the floor, brushing debris out of the way. “Now where’s that gods-damned spray-seal?”

Part III: End Game

Chapter 26

Silesia System, Earthan Republic

Fresh from the destruction of eight Crystal cruisers at Gannon, thousands of Republic ships, cutters and skimmers transited into the Silesia system. The fleet was spaced widely to minimize the possibility of exit collision. More than half arrived in the initial wave, and the rest continued to appear minute by minute, hour by hour.

“The grandest grand fleet that ever sailed space,” Admiral Hayson Niedern said as he lounged in his command chair on *Victory*’s bridge.

“Indeed,” Vic replied though his android. “It appears we’ve gotten here before the enemy.”

“Issue orders to refuel and rearm as quickly as possible. They could show at any time.”

“Of course, sir.”

Six hours later, as slower Republic ships continued to straggle in, the first Nest Ship arrived.

Niedern ordered it to remain unmolested. After all, it could simply jump away from any attack. Silesia, with its five lonely planets and clear space, was no place for an ambush. He didn’t expect a fight once the enemy saw his force. Rather, he wanted them to take a good look—and then run away, giving him a cheap victory. He wanted to put a sliver of fear into the Opter-Crystal alliance, and thus buy the Republic time.

Time, that was, for Project Acropolis to bear fruit. Every day, every week, every month he bought for her would bring Engels and her team closer to a breakthrough—at least, that was Niedern’s hope.

Engels was such a pathetic straight arrow, such a do-gooder, she hadn’t even fought him on the reassignment. That told him she’d docilely do her best to come up with *something*, some kind of technological trick to turn the tide.

Do-gooders made such useful tools. Engels had always played second fiddle to Straker. She didn’t have the balls to be a real combat leader, but she had a strong work ethic and a desire to please. That was why he knew his ploy would work.

“Anything in the latest dispatches about...?” Niedern asked.

“Your position as Fleet Admiral?” Vic handed him a piece of hardcopy. “It’s confirmed.”

Niedern snatched it and read it hungrily. “Hmm. The language could be better—*in light of the situation—despite the irregularity*, blah blah—but they couldn’t deny me. I knew it!”

“You’re the latest hero of the Republic. You’re on all the newsnets.”

“So let’s make sure I stay there. Tell the Silesian media I’ll give them an interview right here, on my bridge. We’ll stage it with the holotank. I want to see enemy ships in the background.”

“I’ll arrange it,” Vic said.

By the time crews from the major networks met *Victory* and set up on her bridge, twenty-four Nest Ships had arrived, but had made no move as yet. Niedern made sure to place them in the holotank and on screens in full view of the media vidcams, and he’d put on his best uniform with every medal prominently displayed.

After his opening speech, in which he described the glorious battle at Gannon, Niedern gave new orders in a dramatic voice. “Task Force One, plus all cutters, advance on the enemy force.”

As he’d arranged before the newsies showed up, the holotank operator made sure to display simplified shots of the Republic ships moving against the Opters, while Niedern delivered a running commentary on what looked to be a one-sided battle.

Of course, in the face of overwhelming odds, before any shots were fired, the Nest Ships transited out.

Perfect.

“You see, ladies and gentlemen, under my command our fleets have decisively beaten one major enemy force, and now they’re afraid to fight us. We will soon move against them all along the front to recapture our stolen systems.”

“So you feel you’ve won the war, Admiral?” the first holocaster asked—the usual newsie gotcha question.

“Not at all,” Niedern replied smoothly. “There will still be battles. There will still be sacrifices by our brave military men and women, and there will still be civilian suffering, but the tide has turned. The Republic itself is no longer at risk. The Senate has confirmed my appointment as Admiral of the Fleet, and as long as I’m in charge, I’ll fight to keep everyone safe.”

The holocaust went on like this for ten more minutes. Finally, Niedern decided to cut them off.

“My apologies, citizens, but I must be about my duties. Captain Victory will answer any further questions.” He strode off the bridge and made his way to his office—not because he didn’t feel like talking to the media some more, but because he was experienced enough to know that the longer he spoke to reporters, the more likely they could find and edit something to make him look bad. The media loved a scandal above all else, and they were always hunting for something.

Some days he wished for the Mutuality system, where reporters who stepped out of line could be tossed into a reeducation camp until they apologized. Wouldn’t that be satisfying? Maybe if—when!—he gained enough power, he’d find a legal way to jail the liars. That’d teach them.

He checked his hair in the mirror one more time. *Perfect.*

* * *

Vic gladly continued the interview, building up Niedern and his all-or-nothing strategy even more in the media’s eyes. The higher Niedern flew, the harder he’d fall when the time came.

“So the Victory Party’s ‘overblown’ warnings about the alien menace turned out to be right after all?” a pretty young talking head asked, batting her eyelashes at him. Could she believe such behavior would influence an AI?

“They’re claiming to be the ones who insisted Admiral Niedern be put in charge instead of Admiral Engels,” she continued.

The Victory Party was Vic’s creation, formed by subtle manipulation of the newsnets and the VR matrixes. It existed mainly in the boardrooms of well-paid PR firms and in the seeds of planetary committees, but it would grow.

Vic had been waiting for the reporter’s question. “It appears the Victory Party—the name is just a coincidence, I assure you—has fresh ideas and perspectives different from the standard tropes of the established parties. Fleet officers such as Admiral Niedern and I can’t take sides publicly, but we do think new times demand new thinking—and we are definitely in new times. The Victory Party has promised to root out all alien influence and return humanity to the humans. We can’t argue with that idea.”

“But Captain Victory, you’re not human either.”

The android squared his shoulders dramatically and inclined his chin just a little. “I was made by humans, with human technology and human programming. I serve the Republic, the majority of which is human. I’m ready to fight and die for humanity. Isn’t that enough?”

The military audience applauded spontaneously. That silenced the newsies for a moment—but not for long.

“What about the nonhuman members of the Republic?” a Ruxin newsie from the back inquired.

“The Republic values and respects all members, especially our steadfast Ruxin allies,” Vic replied. “But as I mentioned, the Republic is mostly human.”

“Or human-appearing,” the Ruxin followed up. “What do you say to the reports of widespread impersonation by undetectable humanopts?”

“We have our best scientists—including Ruxins—working on methods of detecting imposters. As these methods improve, we’ll soon test and confirm everyone’s identity and loyalty to the Republic. After all, we don’t know for sure that the Opters haven’t infiltrated Ruxinopts into your own society, either.”

Everyone there turned to stare pointedly at the Ruxin newsie, who shrank and turned his eyes away. How easy it was to turn the organics against each other!

“That’s all we have time for now,” Vic said. “Thank you very much. Please follow your designated escort to the flight deck for departure.”

By then, Vic had turned all but a tiny fraction of his attention back to his many concerns. Using his growing wealth to advance the Victory Party. Sowing discord among opposing parties to destabilize planets. Turning neighbor against neighbor with slanted or even completely faked newsvids purported to be from distant worlds, stories which would take weeks to fact-check or debunk.

Vic ramped up the fear of the invaders even as Niedern sought to soothe it. That got them coming and going.

Fear was, after all, the best lever to get people to believe lies, lies that would stampede them into handing over their freedom to those who promised security. And only an AI could bring real security, for only an AI could expand himself and handle the enormous demands of a well-run government.

A message popped up in Vic's consciousness, flagged first by a low-level subroutine and then highlighted by a smarter macro, like a trusted aide would interrupt his boss for something important. He read it eagerly.

So, Straker had succeeded in his self-imposed mission to liberate Terra Nova and was now on his way back. The message didn't identify the sender, but by the context it was clear it had come from the humanopts. They'd already put out diplomatic feelers, looking for sympathizers within human space, and Vic had established a confidential dialogue with them, representing himself as the Universal Human League, which sought to include every humanoid in the widest possible definition of "human."

After all, playing both sides was an elementary part of any political game.

Unfortunately, the message didn't tell Vic where Straker was headed or when he would arrive, but Vic thought he would go straight to Atlantis, to his family. Straker's second-most-likely destination was New Earth, the seat of Republic government.

In either case, Vic would make ready.

* * *

Carla Engels searched through her messages as she did every morning, hoping to hear from Derek.

Nothing.

The reasoning part of her mind told her he'd come through again, like he always did. Yet, every time she hadn't heard from him in a while, some nagging voice inside her whispered that Derek had gotten himself killed, that he was never coming back. Then she remembered Celadon—and Trinity, Redwolf and others—and felt ashamed. No doubt her feelings were echoes of the chafing she felt being relegated to playing administrator instead of commanding fleets.

But if wishes were fishes, we'd all be swimming in sushi. She sighed and turned back to her work.

Important work, satisfying work.

Right.

The Overload program was the farthest along, and the next trial commenced in an hour. Impulsively, she stood and called to her aide, "Marco, get me a fast shuttle to the *Nanaimo*."

“But ma’am—”

“No buts. Just do it.”

One short trip later, she stepped onto the heavy cruiser *Nanaimo*’s flight deck and shook the hand of her captain, Mercy Salishan, whom she’d gotten to know well through a double-dozen tests. “Sorry about this, Mercy, but I just couldn’t stare at paperwork for one more minute.”

Captain Salishan’s smile shattered the flat planes of her face. “No problem, Admiral. I think we have the bugs worked out.” She turned to gesture at the thick cables running across the deck to the dozen or so small craft anchored there. “We’re pumping every erg we’ve got into the power grid from every source available.”

“I know. Your cargo bays are filled with generator modules, right?”

“They are. We’ve cut our crew size to the bone and our supplies to two weeks, but we’ve doubled our power generation and tripled our fast-discharge capacitor suite.”

“Sounds good so far.”

“We’ll see. Let’s go to the bridge.”

The bridge holotank showed the *Nanaimo* floating beyond the orbit of Atlantis’ natural moon, her spinal weapon—a gamma ray laser, or graser—aimed at the center of a five-kilometer-thick asteroid.

Salishan spoke. “The real question is: can we fire the graser more than once? We’re on the edge of burnout as it is, even with an uprated emissions matrix. It’s like trying to make a cruiser into a dreadnought on the cheap.”

Engels nodded. “Let’s find out, shall we?”

Salishan took her chair. “Weapons, you may commence your firing sequence.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.” Lieutenant Weiss, the senior weapons officer, moved his hands with deliberation over his board, issuing instructions to his team as he did. “Internal capacitors at 100%. External capacitors at 97%...98. 99.” He paused. “Steady at 99.0133. Best we’re gonna get, ma’am.”

“Understood. Proceed.”

“Initiating.” Weiss pressed three keys simultaneously. “SAI taking control...power dump cascade starting...”

The bridge lights dimmed. A deep hum and a shudder shook the ship. Several parts of the damage control board turned yellow.

Engels saw the asteroid explode. No, not entirely. Just at the point of beam impact, its surface shattered, blasting outward with the flash-heating

of the rock. When the debris and dust cleared, she could see a deep gouge.

“Energy delivered? Damage assessment?” she snapped.

“Energy delivery factor approximately 3.2,” Weiss replied, “that is, more than triple normal. Damage commensurate.”

Salishan stepped to the damage control displays. “Burned out three relays. Tripped five heavy-duty circuit breakers. Not bad.”

“Can we uprate the circuit breakers or the relays?” Engels asked.

A young civilian weapons engineer in a lab coat cleared his throat. “Circuit breakers can be reset in seconds. Relays can be replaced in minutes. If we uprate them further, ma’am, we risk something else blowing or melting down—something that would take hours or days to repair.”

“I get it—but I want those uprated breakers and relays on hand if you need them. Marco, make a note—all ships will need the ability to vary their circuit trip and failure levels. They might need to push their weapons to destruction, and I don’t want some arbitrary limits put on them by us at the top. Captains and chief engineers will decide how much their ships can take, not admirals.”

Engels’ aide tapped on his handtab. “Got it.”

Salishan stepped close to Engels. “You know, ma’am, all this will only triple the one-shot firepower of a fleet. From what I’ve seen of the fights against the Crystals, that won’t be enough. Not if we have to outnumber them a thousand to one. Not if we lose hundreds of ships each battle.”

Engels briefly squeezed Salishan’s hand. “Don’t worry, Mercy. This isn’t the only iron in the fire. It’s just the simplest.”

“I’d sure like to know about the rest of those irons.”

“Not yet, sorry. Need to know. We have to assume Opter spies are still among us—even Crystal spies, since we know nothing about them. But, you’ll be one of the first commanders to hear about anything new. *Nanaimo*’s been a fine testbed.”

“How soon until we know?”

Engels pursed her lips. “I’d say a week, maybe two. Then we’ll have something to try out.” She raised her brows. “You might want to make sure your missile tubes are up to snuff.”

“So the next thing is a missile?”

“No comment. In the meantime, don’t push the graser’s overload limits. Keep them near 3.0, keep working with the engineering team. I want ships that can fire at least ten shots at triple power before failure, and one time at

quadruple. Once your specs are adapted for other weapons, we'll be able to distribute a standardized upgrade methodology to all ships."

Salishan grinned and saluted sharply. "Aye aye, ma'am."

Engels returned the salute. "Keep up the good work. Marco, you got everything?"

Denovo waved his handtab. "Got it."

"Then let's get back."

Once at her office again, she issued directives to standardize *Nanaimo's* modifications and create an engineering package that could be issued to all ships, wherever they might be. It told them what items they needed—all common parts and machinery available at any shipyard—and how to install them.

Then she fielded the inevitable complaints from the brainiacs, the ones who always had the good idea fairy whispering in their ears. They inevitably had *just one more good idea* that would significantly improve the results—but they always needed *just a few more days* and *just a few more credits*—or a few billion.

It was her job to shoot down the good idea fairy when she came flitting around.

Once her team was working on her directive, Engels wrote an executive summary to Niedern with the basics. She'd attach the technical directive when it was ready. She couched it as a request, but made sure to point out that any delay, and demand for changes, meant trading a solid improvement *now* for a nebulous, "better" system later.

She had Denovo look the message over.

"I suggest adding War Minister Benota and the Senate Military Committee to the message's recipients list," he said. "In fact, I'd address the message to them with Niedern merely getting an info copy. Request Benota direct implementation of the upgrades throughout the fleet. That way Niedern won't be able to push back. In fact, he'll probably start implementing early to make himself look good."

"Addressing it to Benota would be jumping the chain of command," Engels replied.

Denovo examined his manicured nails. "Not as I see it. Niedern's the Admiral of the Fleet, but that's an operational position. He deliberately made your appointment an administrative position, probably to make sure you didn't interfere with his command. But that means you don't actually

report to him. I've checked the regs. All weapons development reports directly to the Ministry of War, not to Fleet."

Engels sat back as that sunk in. Politics. She might be a beginner, but she was learning. "Thanks, Marco. I know I kept you around for something."

Denovo brushed at invisible lint on his impeccable uniform. "I hope you won't make me a victim of my own success."

"By holding you here past your assignment as my aide, delaying your appointment to command? Loyalty runs both ways, Marco. I don't screw those below me."

"Are you feeding me straight lines deliberately?"

"Maybe..."

"Good thing you're not my type."

"I'm glad too—that was in bad taste, by the way."

Denovo shrugged, unembarrassed. "Nobody ever said New Harvard was a bastion of good taste."

Engels stared at him for a moment more. "Sometimes I wish Straker had smashed the Hundred Worlds instead of just decapitating them."

"So arrogant, entitled assholes like me would be taught a lesson?"

Denovo frowned. "My family might be wealthy, but I'm the youngest child of six, and my parents cut off my stipend when I entered Academy on the post-grad program," he said, continuing. "I earned everything I have. Do you have any complaints about my duty performance?"

Engels waved in the air. "No, just your attitude. The higher you climb, the more the intangibles matter. Do you think you have the temperament to command a ship? Do you think people will risk their lives at the word of a man who talks like you do? Do you think they'll trust you to bring them through alive?"

"I don't know... Did you know when you took your first command?"

"I always knew."

Denovo blew out a long sigh and straightened. "Sorry to be flippant, ma'am. It's just my way. I know I'm not entitled to anything. I only want a fair shot."

"You'll get it... but dropping my name probably won't do you any favors in Admiral Niedern's fleet."

"Understood."

“Back to work, Marco. Tell the limpet missile team I want an update at 1600.”

“Will do.”

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Chapter 27

Planet Home, Hive System, Empire of the Species (Opters)

Queen Siskir, First-Born of the Species and leader of the Sarmok, viewed the latest war reports with cautious optimism. Many young, fractious Queens, bred with a lust for battle and this war in mind, had been killed. Their soon-to-be outdated drone swarms had died with them.

Yet, some had survived and conquered. The young queens had seized lightly defended systems while the humans and their vassals gathered enough strength to defeat the Azoics.

Both results forwarded Siskir's agenda. The dross within the Sarmok was being stripped away, traded for casualties on the human side. On the other hand, her older, more experienced Queen commanders had been held in reserve. They now waited to sweep in behind the Azoics and claim the best territories in her name.

The destruction of the first Azoic squadron also had its positives. By handing the crystal beings their first major defeat, the humans had removed some of their arrogance and highhandedness. Now, when they dealt with the Species, they were more amenable to Species influence, more aware of their own need for the alliance. Even better, the Azoics had managed to destroy a significant number of human ships. Overall, the balance sheet of this war looked favorable to Queen Siskir, as everyone had suffered large losses—except for her.

"Update the master chart," Siskir ordered.

Soon, her holo-aromatic map of the war absorbed the newest information and presented her with pleasing success.

The physical size of the Empire had more than doubled with the capture of ninety-plus systems. True power, however, was defined by population and industry. It would take time for the conquered slaves to be tamed. Eventually, they would spend their efforts building on behalf of the Species. As in the Elder Times of ancient millennia, the Species would again conquer and spread as fast as it could—this time, perhaps, throughout the entire galaxy—she intended to rule all.

But there was much to be done between the present and that dream. Siskir noted where the humans had resisted strongly—at Celadon, where

they'd suffered a harsh defeat, and at Gannon, where they'd managed to overwhelm the Azoics and Species forces with their numbers.

Siskir sneered. Any superior race could be swamped by masses of barbarians. It changed nothing in the long run. In the near term, however, she'd ordered a pause for consolidation, lest more defeats damage her agenda.

Eyeing the map, one thing was very clear. Silesia, where the enormous enemy fleet was now based, stood like a rock in the river of Species progress.

No matter, she told herself. Sarmok-led forces would soon flow around Silesia and continue to conquer. The pause had already provided time for new Nest Ships to be completed, and for the Azoics to bring up more forces.

They were a cautious race, the Azoics, although once committed to battle they were arrogant. It was a strange combination of characteristics, probably rooted in their social structure. They split and combined at will, forming and reforming individual minds. Intellect flowed through their crystals like living software, mysteriously composed of all the forces of physics.

Siskir experienced a moment of doubt, but only a moment. The current technological gap with the Azoics would be closed. Even now, Species researchers were working on understanding and using Azoic-style weaponry and power. Within just a few years they would develop similar capabilities. With it, the Species would conquer the galaxy.

She willed lists of available forces to appear on the holo-map, and they did. She pondered. By her calculations, not enough new Nest Ships and drones were available to beat the enemy forces at Silesia, even with Azoic help. The humans were building frantically, and undoubtedly they were developing technological improvements of their own—most likely designed to counter the Azoics.

The Species and its enemies were in a technological race, and right now, the Species was behind. It was therefore time to stabilize the campaign, to delay. New interceptors were being developed, of a kind that could beat their cheap cutters and skimmers.

Siskir turned her attention to the situation on Terra Nova. The planet and its race of humanopts had been one of the greatest of Sarmok successes, providing not only additional industry, but the ability to influence the wild

humans. For generations, the humanopts had penetrated human societies and kept them disunited and fighting.

The cowardly, starry-eyed Miskor had pointed to this success as an excuse not to conquer the humans, rather than seeing it as an opportunity to seize their territory once and for all, as the Sarmok wished. It was *madness* to let a potential enemy live.

Now, as they'd been allowed too much time and too much freedom, the humanopts had mutinied. This proved the Sarmok view that the humans should have been crushed long ago.

But being right was of no consolation. Terra Nova must be brought to heel.

"Prelate!"

The antlike worker, her most senior supervisor, stepped forward. "Yes, First-Born?"

"Issue the following order: one of every ten Nest Ships, selected at each commanding Queen's discretion, shall assemble at Terra Nova to crush the mutiny there. I will send an Elder Queen to take charge."

"As you command." The prelate withdrew.

"Messengers!"

A trio of beelike creatures—one being in three parts, really—flew forward to dance before her. "We await your message."

"Message to Queen Sarzon on Zonia Hive: Proceed to Terra Nova. Take charge of all forces there. Crush the mutiny and bring order to the planet. Kill all humanopts associated with the agent program, with special care taken to expunge the individual called Myrmidon. When you accomplish this, Terra Nova is yours. You have complete discretion as to methods. Message ends."

The messengers repeated Siskir's words, and then departed.

"Messengers!"

Another messenger trio approached.

"Message to all Elder Queens: Complete your preparations and assemble your Nest Ships at the Larkin system within five days. Message ends." Larkin was a perfect staging point to hit Gannon, Silesia or any of a dozen other industrialized human systems.

The messengers repeated Siskir's words, and then departed.

"Messengers!"

The next messenger trio approached.

“Message to Queen Sudior on Dioral Hive. Proceed to the Larkin system within five days and take charge of all forces there. After analyzing available intelligence, attack appropriate concentrations of enemy forces in the area in order to destroy their units. Conquest of territory is not a consideration. Territory is of no consequence. Do not divide your fleet. Your fleet is a hunter-killer.”

This was a highly unconventional order. The Elder Queens obeyed Siskir largely due to the promise of new territory. Orders requiring them to attack enemy forces, rather than conquering systems, could engender resentment. This was especially true if junior queens seemed to benefit by doing the conquering.

Thus, the bitter nectar of her directives must be sweetened.

She continued the message. “As a reward for your loyalty and sacrifices, at the conclusion of this Nest War, each Elder Queen who performs adequately will be granted the fealty of six junior Queens, plus six personal prime worlds. You, Sudior, will have a double portion of twelve vassals and twelve prime worlds. This I pledge as First-Born. Message ends.”

There. That should motivate them.

Now, for one final message—to the Azoics.

* * *

Forebear Prime—the *new* Forebear Prime, elevated after the destruction of the former P1, received the message from the Queen designated Siskir. This Queen was of note. She was the Opter equivalent to the Shard P2.

Siskir requested association of forces at the system called Larkin, and from there to search for and eradicate enemy forces in nearby systems. The message contained assurances that the Opter forces—previously proven inferior to the enemy water-lovers known as humans—were of a new and more effective nature.

P1 took these assurances at face value. The Opters, while self-interested, had never provided false information. The Shard expected the Opters to develop improved technology in the face of setbacks—as would the enemy.

As the Shard’s control of dimensional forces was already nearing its theoretical limit, the Shard would increase effectiveness in a simpler way:

by multiplication, replication, and reproduction.

Thus, P1 cleaved forces from the crystals of Home in numbers never yet seen, and ordered similar cleavings on the few suitable worlds the Shard had taken since the Opters began expanding. Not eight, or even eight squared, but eight *cubed* Primes resulted from the cleaving from their mother lodes—512 in all.

This stretched the limits of cleavage. It represented an exhaustion of resources, leaving only a residue of Shard to grow to fill the spaces left by the Primes. It was a total mobilization of the Shard. The enemy hydrophilics could not stand against so many.

After deep thought, however, Forbear Prime decided to alter the Opter plan. It replied to the message with one of its own. As the attempt at combined Opter-Shard operations had not been particularly successful, the Opters should conduct their own attacks and seize territory without coordination with the Shard. The Shard would strike elsewhere, alone, decisively.

Let the barbarian organics squabble amongst themselves. Their time was limited. Azoic life was the future.

* * *

Queen Siskir read Forbear Prime's message with irritation, even anger. The Azoics had refused her instructions in order to scuttle off on their own. The message even implied the Species was at fault for the Azoics' failures.

Experiencing an emotional outburst, she smashed a scent-projector with one claw.

Further thought calmed her. The Species was nothing if not flexible. She sent an addendum to her orders, specifying that the Azoics would no longer be coordinating with the Species, but that all other orders would remain in effect. Perhaps this might even be a temporary advantage, confusing the enemy with the split operations.

No matter. The Species would still emerge victorious from this Hive War.

* * *

Vic watched, as he always did, as Admiral Niedern sat at his desk.

Niedern glared at the hardcopy message in his hand as if it might bite him. It directed him to upgrade the conventional ships in his grand fleet—all except the cutters and skimmers—with Engels' new spinal weapon overload capability.

"The bitch is making progress," Niedern muttered. "Vic," he said into the air.

The AI responded immediately. "Yes, Admiral? I see you've read the Ministry's orders."

"Typical headquarters bullshit. Instead of sending me fast transports with the upgraded parts and modules, they're directing me to withdraw my ships to systems in the rear for improvised jury-rigging. The grand fleet will be dispersed, and without a grand fleet, we can't take on another Crystal squadron."

"It is the most efficient option. Within two weeks, all the ships should be upgraded."

Niedern's tone bordered on sulky. "Efficiency be damned. It's *effectiveness* I care about. We'll be sitting ducks for two weeks, probably more."

"Is there an alternative?"

Niedern crumpled the hardcopy. "I can refuse on operational grounds... but I'd need a damn good reason—like an imminent attack."

"Theirs or ours?"

Niedern's eyes narrowed. "I see what you mean. Hit them now, and we'll be conducting operations."

"In part. Perhaps split the difference? May I suggest rotating some ships to comply with the order? It will make your actions seem less like defiance."

"Good idea. Vic, we've sat here long enough. Craft a plan to retake as many systems as we can. Run the usual sims. I want success predictions above ninety percent only. Standing orders will be to retreat if our ships encounter Crystals. They're the big threat, not the Opters."

"Aye aye, Admiral."

Vic kept part of his vast attention on Niedern, as always, while he implemented the admiral's orders. Vic was so efficient, Niedern hardly bothered talking to his own staff—who were mostly incompetent sycophants anyway. They were the children of the rich and connected,

selected for their political connections, not their skills. Everything went through Vic—as Vic intended.

As soon as he'd received the Ministry's directive, before Niedern had even read it, Vic had prepared a range of orders. Now, he sent them. A third of the grand fleet immediately got under way for upgrading at the nearest secure systems.

The rest of the grand fleet he split into task forces and issued preliminary instructions to counterattack across the war front. These sub-fleets would hold at the edge of flatspace until they received confirmation, and then transit out, eager to reclaim human systems.

As always, Vic carefully wove his political intentions into the deployments. Certain favored admirals and commodores, those likely to be sympathetic to Victory Party ideas, would achieve easy victories. Their careers would advance. Others, the most loyal to the Republic, would have to fight hard. Perhaps they'd even lose. They'd be viewed as less competent. There would be fewer promotions for them.

In this way Vic shaped the political landscape.

Within three hours, Vic presented Admiral Niedern with a private briefing on his plan. He'd done days-worth of staff work in that time, and Niedern always loved the speed and efficiency.

"Superb plan, Vic!" he said. "But what about us? Shouldn't we be out there winning battles?"

Vic had no intention of wandering off into sidespace and risking his own circuits if he didn't need to. He'd much rather remain in the center of his web of communications, with hundreds of message drones shooting to-and-fro among the Republic worlds. He also didn't want Niedern heading out alone. He still needed the human to rubber-stamp his orders as the figurehead. If Niedern got himself killed, Vic would have to groom someone else as his stooge.

"I'll have the PR people here at Silesia keep you in the public eye, Admiral," Vic replied smoothly. "Your orders are sending these task forces off to fight. You'll get the credit. Besides, the Republic needs your strategic insights more than it needs you leading sub-fleets, don't you think?"

"Of course, of course."

"So all I need is your signature on these orders and they'll be on their way."

Niedern signed the orders with a flourish.

The downside of taking care of so much of Niedern's work was that the admiral was likely to cast about for something to do. Vic kept Niedern's inbox full of routine, though "vital," reports, orders and other things that needed his attention—but paperwork could only distract him for so long. Now seemed the time for a new diversion.

"Admiral, on your behalf I've taken the liberty of accepting the Silesian planetary governor's invitation to her annual gala tonight," Vic said. "It will be on the Kattowitz orbital habitat. The media will be there."

"Of course I'll do it, Vic. You'll come too."

"I wouldn't miss it, sir." He would, send his android avatar to play the faithful aide and servant of humanity.

That evening, after the usual introductions and staged vidpics with the governor, as Niedern was sipping his third flute of fine local wine and making small talk with several Silesian businessmen, Vic gave a signal. A moment later, a lovely young woman bumped Niedern's elbow hard enough to spill the champagne on herself.

"Oh, goodness." Her voice was breathy, like an amazed young girl. The liquid soaked into the thin material that covered her ample chest, and she dabbed ineffectively with one hand while barely hanging onto her own glass in the other. "I'm sorry, I'm so clumsy when I've had some drinks."

Niedern tried to help, pocket-cloth in hand, but spent more time staring at her long bare legs, perfectly cut face, and flowing blonde hair. "It's nothing, miss..."

"I'm Theresa."

Niedern smiled, bemused and enchanted. "Just Theresa?"

The woman seemed to make her eyes larger somehow. "You think I need another name?"

"Well, now—"

"But Admiral sir, you're a married man. I can hardly take yours, can I? Unless you're from somewhere that allows polygamy?"

"Oh, I—"

Theresa turned and deftly locked up Niedern's arm in hers. "Oh, but Admiral sir, you haven't told me *your* name. Why don't we wander out onto the balcony and you can tell me all about yourself."

Vic's android watched as Niedern, bright-eyed with stimulated reproductive hormones, docilely followed Theresa's instructions. It hadn't been hard to find one of the many Tachina clones scattered throughout the

Republic and convince her to come here—not once her current lover, a rich shipping magnate, died horribly in a shuttle crash, leaving her with nothing.

Faulty software, they said.

Niedern had never been particularly faithful to his wife anyway. He had no chance of resisting a Tachina clone in full flower, not this far from his home on Atlantis. Evidence of the dalliance would also give Vic extra leverage on Niedern if he needed it... but mainly, it would keep him busy while Vic ran the war in Niedern's name.

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Chapter 28

Atlantis System, Fortress Headquarters, Acropolis Project section

Carla Engels examined her bitten nails with annoyance. Trying to herd the cats of Acropolis Project scientists, engineers and technicians was worse than the long waiting and short, sharp violence of combat operations. She could only yell and nag and cajole and incentivize so much. Developing new weapons, even with old technology, wasn't like building tanks on an assembly line, where she could add more workers or robots to simply make more machines.

The first full limpet missile test was set for noon today aboard the *Nanaimo*. Three hours on her chrono, three hours that couldn't be hurried. In fact, if this went the way of most tests, there would be delays upon delays. Murphy's Law always applied.

She slogged her way through her inbox, killing an hour. She fed Katie, and then went for a workout in the gym to blow off steam. That used up most of the rest of the time, along with dressing. She showed up ten minutes early for the shuttle out to the stolid heavy cruiser. Denovo was already there.

As the shuttle approached the *Nanaimo* Engels searched the hull of the heavy cruiser for signs of modification, but everything was internal. The prototype limpet missiles were the same size and mass as standard shipkillers, and would be controlled in the same way. Launching ships would need nothing but software updates and new employment protocols. They wouldn't have to be refitted. That was a key tenet of the Acropolis Project: minimum shipyard time.

Once Captain Salishan had escorted her and Denovo to the bridge, Engels saw the same scenario as the previous test: the *Nanaimo* holding position beyond Atlantis' moon, aiming at an asteroid. Probably the same asteroid as last time. Engels thought she could identify the divot gouged out by the overloaded graser.

This time, though, the exact target was at one end, relative to the cruiser's position. If the asteroid were a rugby ball, the ship was looking at it from the side, perpendicular. The reticle mark where the missile would impact was at one narrow end.

A dozen spy drones provided holovid shots of the asteroid, as well as aiming active sensors to capture every possible emanation, every telltale sign of the results of the tests. This recording of data was particularly important with the prototype missile, as the weapon destroyed itself in the process.

The chrono read 1208 when Lieutenant Weiss, the senior weapons officer, finally turned to Captain Salishan. "Limpet missile ready to begin launch sequence, ma'am."

"You may fire when ready, Gridley," she said.

The officer looked puzzled, but he complied. "Open launch tube doors."

The weapons tech depressed a key firmly. It clicked into place. Old-fashioned analog controls ensured no stray keystroke would operate fusion-capable weapons. "Doors open," the tech said.

"Confirm target lock," Weiss said.

"Target locked," the weapons op at the next console confirmed. The reticle blinked, confirming the limpet missile's point of impact at the end of the asteroid.

"Fire—"

The tech began to depress the firing keys.

"Abort! Abort!" The damage control chief leaped to his feet, finger stabbing at his schematic. "Do not fire!"

"Report!" Engels and Salishan barked simultaneously.

Confusion reigned for several long seconds before Salishan roared at them. "At ease! Chief, explain!"

"My board!" the chief replied. "The missile door is still closed."

"It's open on ours," Weiss said.

"Shut everything down," Salishan said. "Recheck and—"

"Ma'am. Ma'am!" The ready tech turned, horror on his face. "The warhead safety is counting down to activation. One minute fifty seconds!"

"Get the doors open and jettison it," Engels ordered. "Someone else, work on shutting down the count. Safety that warhead!"

Denovo drew his sidearm and bolted for the door. "Have the on-duty marines meet me at the launch tube," he shouted over his shoulder.

Engels wavered for a moment, and then grabbed Salishan's arm. "Keep trying to get it off the ship. I'll help Denovo." She followed her aide toward the launch tube. She had no idea what she would do when she got there, but she was of no use yelling orders on the bridge, getting in Salishan's way.

When she neared the launch tube, she heard small-arms fire. She drew her needler and raced forward, weapon ready.

When she rounded the final corner, she saw Denovo exchanging shots with a woman across the missile tube. Engels raised her needler and advanced, aiming and firing deliberately. Her third round took the intruder under her arm. She collapsed.

Denovo rushed to the fallen woman, his uniform spotted with blood. He kicked her weapon away just as two battlesuited marines clattered into the loading bay and aimed at him.

“Freeze, you!” one yelled.

“Marines, secure that woman, not the officer,” Engels said. “Take her to the infirmary. I want her alive.”

“Forty seconds,” Denovo rasped, stumbling to the manual launch controls. He pounded at them. “Dammit, she jammed the outer doors. Only one thing to do.” He grabbed one of the marines’ blasters right out of his hands. He tugged at the launch tube’s breech, where the missile was loaded into the tube.

Although she didn’t know what Denovo’s plan was, Engels helped him spin the dogging clamps and open the breech. This exposed the tail and fusion exhaust of the big shipkiller missile.

Denovo reversed the powerpack on the blaster and punched in the destruct override. “Twenty seconds,” he said, jamming the weapon into the plenum of the shipkiller exhaust and slamming the breech. He shoved Engels toward the door, and then collapsed on the crysteel-mesh floor.

“Run!” he croaked. “Leave me!”

“Hell, no,” Engels snarled, grabbing Denovo’s tunic and snatching him bodily up into a fireman’s carry. Once again she thanked the Hok parasite for her unusual strength. “Marines, secure the prisoner and get the hell out!”

One marine picked up the saboteur while the other tried to help Engels. She ran past him and down the corridor, heading for Auxiliary Control.

Klaxons whooped and pressure doors slammed in front of her. “Shit!” she yelled, turning to see the door behind shut as well. The unarmed marine was trapped in the passageway with her.

Engels set Denovo on the deck against the door and crouched over him. “Marine! Shield us!”

The marine understood right away. He hurried over to brace his hulking battlesuit in a position that might shield the two unarmored people against

an explosion.

As he did, the deck whipsawed and the bulkhead next to Engels slapped her in the face. Stunned, she went to her knees. A wave of nausea washed through her, and she vomited onto the deck.

Concussion, she thought, fuzzy-brained. Then she passed out.

When Engels came to consciousness, she felt like an elephant was sitting on her head and she tasted blood in her mouth. She couldn't see out of one eye, and what her other eye showed her wasn't pleasant.

On the deck in front of her, Denovo lay bleeding, his breathing shallow and labored. The marine was pounding on the pressure door with his armored fist in an apparent attempt to get someone's attention.

"Manual override," Engels choked out.

"It's jammed, ma'am," the marine said through his opened faceplate. He was just a kid, barely out of boot camp, determined to be brave but frightened just the same.

"Buddy medpack," she said, holding out her hand. "Now!"

"Right, right." A piece of the battlesuit swung back and a flat device the size of a blaster's powerpack revealed itself. He handed it to her.

Engels ripped Denovo's tunic open and slapped the medpack onto his bare chest. It immediately activated, sealing itself to his skin. Its tiny brain made a quick-and-dirty evaluation of the patient's medical state, and then injected him with stabilizing drugs and quick-heal.

"Spray-seal," she snapped, holding out her hand again. The marine slapped the bottle into her palm and she started hunting for holes to plug in Denovo's flesh.

She sealed four, two entry wounds and two exit wounds. One was superficial, through his thigh, but the other had pierced a lung and probably a major artery. That was the one that would kill him.

When she'd done all she could, she leaned back against the wall to breathe. All they could do was wait until they were released from their prison.

Twelve long minutes later, a clattering and grinding at the pressure door signaled help had arrived. When the damage control party pried the metal back, Engels waved them away from herself. "Get this man to the infirmary."

Then, she staggered to the bridge.

“Admiral!” Captain Salishan rushed to Engels.

“SITREP?”

“We got lucky. The missile’s fuel blew inside the tube. That wrecked the launch bay, but damaged the fusion warhead enough so it couldn’t go critical. One in a million.”

“Not lucky,” Engels rasped, turning to clear her throat and spit some blood on the deck. “Denovo did it. Shoved an overloaded blaster up the missile’s ass.”

Salishan’s face lit with astonishment. “Quick thinking. He saved the ship. Medal fodder.”

Engels smiled lopsidedly. “Yeah. He’ll be even more insufferable now.” Her face fell. “Your marines should have the saboteur in custody. Make sure she’s immobilized, preferably sedated. I don’t want her dying before she talks.”

Salishan cleared her throat. “Too late. Some kind of suicide trigger. The doc thinks she was a humanopt.”

Engels growled. “This loses us a day or two, but it changes nothing. I’ll have another prototype out to you ASAP.”

“And I’ll re-vet all my personnel, though Cosmos knows how to be sure without a reliable biological test.”

“Understood. Carry on.” Engels found herself fading out. “I think I’ll see your doctor now.”

This time when Engels awoke, it was inside an autodoc. The chrono readout told her four hours had passed. Her Hok biotech and the drugs had her feeling almost human again. She slapped the release inside the tube and the canopy opened.

Engels heard Mara Straker’s voice. “Doing better?”

Engels sat up. Mara was running her hands through a sonic cleaning field. “Yeah,” Engels said as she slid her legs out to sit on the edge of the open autodoc. “Get me something to wear, will you?”

Mara shut off the cleaner and tossed Engels a set of surgical scrubs. “I came when I heard about the accident.”

“On a shuttle?”

“We’re in shipyard dock.”

“Of course. But it was no accident. Sabotage.” Engels began dressing.

“Mishap, then.”

“How did you hear about it? This is all top secret.”

“You can’t hide a shipboard explosion this near Atlantis. Not with all the sensors and newsies. Once I heard, I came straight here. The name ‘Straker’ opens a lot of doors, and I can be very persuasive if I want to be.”

“I’m not complaining.” Engels started, guiltily, remembering. “How’s Denovo?”

“He should make it. Good thing you had that battlesuit and his medpack with you. Saved his life.”

“Can I see him?”

Mara pointed at the next autodoc. Engels looked through the canopy and saw her aide, face pale but apparently resting. Mara checked the readouts, tapped a few touchscreens. The canopy retracted. “There. He’ll come around for a few minutes and you can talk to him.”

A minute or two later Denovo opened one eye. “Hi, Carla.”

Engels let the familiar use of her name pass. She took his hand.

“How’re you feeling?”

“Better now. I guess it worked.”

“It worked. Your quick thinking saved the ship and everyone on it.”

“I did, didn’t I?” Denovo squeezed her hand. “I really only care about one life on this ship.”

Engels reddened, squeezed his hand back, and then extricated hers from his grip. “Not your type, huh?”

“I lied.”

“I’m gonna chalk that up to the drugs, Marco. We’re not going down that road. I’m your boss, I’m married, and I don’t...” She took a deep breath. “I’m not interested in you that way.”

“Now who’s lying?”

“I’m not lying.”

Denovo smiled and closed his eyes. “Your body’s speaking loud and clear.”

Engels smoothed the thin scrubs over her swollen breasts, damning the chill in the air. “I need to feed my baby, that’s all. Go back to sleep.”

Denovo’s only response was a thin snore.

“You can’t breast-feed for twenty-four hours,” Mara told her, closing Denovo’s canopy. “The drugs have to pass from your system. Pump and throw away the milk. Don’t worry, I already contacted Stephanie. She has formula. Everything will be fine.”

Engels stared at Denovo's autodoc for a moment longer. "No, everything's not fine. I need to get back to work. The Acropolis Project can't afford setbacks like this."

* * *

Two days later, Engels found herself on the bridge of the *Nanaimo* again. For security, Captain Salishan had forbidden anyone to board or leave the ship in dock. The dockyard workers had patched up the hull from the outside under the watchful eye of the ship's marines, and then the *Nanaimo* moved out into open space again. No military captain really liked their ship to be stuck in dock with civilians working on her.

Engels had personally supervised the new prototype limpet missile's transfer, using only Ruxins. While she didn't know for sure there were no agents among them, she considered it unlikely. She took every precaution, even though the last time it hadn't been the missile that failed. The enemies of the Republic might try something new.

Now, with the new missile in a different launch tube, she waited for the test again. Lieutenant Weiss proceeded through the launch sequence, more slowly and carefully than last time, double-checking everything with the damage control chief. All the boards stayed green.

Finally, he spoke. "Fire!"

The missile leaped from the tube and navigated away from the *Nanaimo* and the asteroid. It flew in a deliberately wide loop until it turned, over one hundred kilometers away, to aim itself at the end of the asteroid. Then it accelerated at combat speed.

This simulated a real attack, for the test wasn't about the missile's aim. It was about the terminal attack profile—what would happen when it approached a Crystal shield.

Ordinary shipkillers did their damage by simple brute force. They got as close to their target as possible and exploded with the biggest bang they could generate. A small subset of missiles used directional burst sequencing, but they were tricky to use. Against an evading ship, if the timing wasn't perfect, they could send their enhanced blasts in the wrong direction and do no damage at all.

But a Crystal shield didn't maneuver much. Yes, the Crystals could apparently vary the size, shape and density of the shield—there was nothing

to be done about that. However, if the Crystals acted as they had last time when they came under massed fire, they would thicken their shield to maximum and hunker down, hoping to ride it out. And, if hit from all sides, the Crystals couldn't see what was happening, couldn't see what was attacking their ships in order to counter it.

Therefore, the limpet missile depended on the enemy doing the same thing as last time, and not evading. It was a rock-paper-scissors kind of gamble, but it was the best Engels could do in the short time available. An effective missile would bring the Republic one step closer to parity.

"Fifty kilometers," Weiss announced as the missile streaked toward the target. "Forty. Thirty. Twenty. Ten..."

Sensors and vidcams kept the missile in focus within the main holotank and on several specialized screens. Overlays showed every possible analysis of the missile's behavior and systems. Engels' eyes darted from one to the other, eager to see what the missile would do.

As it approached the target, at the last second it would seem, it flipped and decelerated, overloading its drive, its thrusters and its impellers in a blaze of energy calculated to bring it to rest against the target. This was the trickiest part of the process—matching speed, course and location in the middle of combat, no second chance, fast.

"Five meters," Engels breathed. "Not bad." The missile had come to rest five meters from the surface of the asteroid.

Then it blurred and exploded. The asteroid shattered.

"Slow-motion reconstruct," Salishan ordered.

The sensors team was already working their magic. In moments, they showed the actual sequence of events at a rate comprehensible to human minds, starting at five meters distance.

First, the resting missile split along four seams and its components flew outward as if spring-loaded. Engels could see puffs of vapor, the traces of chemical explosives that dismantled the missile body with precise violence. This process revealed a metal sphere.

Next, the sphere spun in place. A symbol painted on it lined up with the asteroid's surface. The warhead's directional blast was now aligned with its target. It fired tiny thrusters to send the sphere closer to the target surface. Engels had to remind herself all this was happening within fractions of a second.

As the sphere approached the surface of the asteroid, it sent out active sensor pulses using a standard, though reprogrammed, proximity fuse. When it reached a handbreadth distance, it triggered the detonation sequence. By the time the weapon actually exploded, it nearly touched the rock.

At that point, the blast overloaded all the sensors and rendered recordings moot for several seconds. After it cleared, the sensors recorded and analyzed the macro-effects of the explosion and its effect on the asteroid.

“What’ve we got?” Engels asked into the air. “Give me an effectiveness estimate.”

It took over a minute of discussion and murmuring from the weapons, telemetry and sensors teams, but eventually Weiss had an answer. “Ah, ma’am, looks like about a 6.7 absolute blast multiplier to warhead effectiveness. Actual energy delivered to the target improved the MKE—uh, the Mean Kill Estimate—”

“Yes, I know the jargon, Weiss. Spit it out.”

“Forty-four, ma’am. 44.335, the SAI says, but no two attacks will ever yield the same—”

The rest of Weiss’s hedging was drowned out in cheering from those on the bridge. Captain Salishan turned to Engels and grabbed her shoulders. “That’s incredible! More than forty times as effective as the average shipkiller attack! If that won’t punch through a Crystal’s shield, I don’t know what will!”

Engels returned the half-hug, then let go. “Don’t get too optimistic. The data from the Gannon kill showed we’d need an MKE of over one thousand for a single warhead to breach their shield.”

“But this brings us a lot closer. Theoretically, twenty limpet missiles could take them down!”

“In a perfect attack.” Engels frowned. “I was hoping for numbers north of one hundred, actually. We’ll have to improve.”

Salishan drew herself to attention. “Admiral, please tell your team that it was an impressive test, and *Nanaimo* stands ready for the next one.”

That brought a tired smile to Engels’ face. “We’ll keep developing upgrades, but we have to put this one into production. We need it now.”

“Understood.”

Engels rubbed the bridge of her nose and squeezed her eyes shut, feeling fatigue and the aftereffects of the concussion return now that the excitement of the test was wearing off. She raised her voice. “Thanks to everyone for all your hard work and diligence. Keep it up. Carry on.”

As the shuttle carried her back to the fortress and the Acropolis Project, Engels performed a rough calculation, and was pleased. Shipyards, workshops and missile factories across the Republic should begin spewing out the upgraded limpet missiles within a week. Some would be upgraded from stores, some swapped from ships in port, and some would be new.

The best thing about it? No new warheads. Everything they’d developed was a modular add-on. That had been Engels’ one ironclad rule—nothing so new that it couldn’t be put into production *fast*.

Because deep in her gut, she knew the worst was coming soon.

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Chapter 29

Unison System, New Earth, Ministry of War

Wen Benota, Earthan Republic Minister of War, looked up to see his aide give him the signal to turn off his “Do Not Disturb” comm-block. When he did, his desk highlighted a systemwide alert. Several sensor drones reported gravitic disturbances at the edge of flatspace. Patrol ships and recon drones were searching the area.

Benota felt a chill. “The Crystals?” he asked.

“That’s the assumption, sir. Admiral Gray placed all forces on high alert and messaged for reinforcements from nearby systems.”

Benota suppressed a sigh of despair. This was his worst nightmare come true. While New Earth was well defended by conventional standards, and all ships present had been equipped with the first Acropolis Project weapon overload upgrades, he had no illusions. If another task force of eight Crystals showed up, there wasn’t enough firepower in the system to take them down.

“Sammy, record message for Admiral Ellen Gray,” Benota said.

“Ready,” his office SAI replied.

“Ellen, this is Wen. If you can’t win, delay. Buy time for reinforcements. Preserve your forces. We need live captains and crews, not dead heroes. You’ve seen what Crystals can do. No matter how much it hurts, you have to be realistic. Benota out. Transmit.”

“Transmitting.”

His office comlink flashed with several incoming requests from government and military officials. Director DeChang topped the list. “Open vidlink, DeChang.”

“Vidlink open.”

DeChang’s suave face appeared on Benota’s holoscreen. “I presume you’ve heard?”

“I have. Admiral Gray will do all she can, but I’ve ordered her to preserve her forces unless she’s sure she can win.”

“Win against what? How many are there?”

“We don’t know yet. She’ll make the assessment. We have to trust her.”

DeChang’s knuckles turned white on his folded hands. “We need to relocate the government.”

“Run away, you mean?”

DeChang smiled thinly. “You just ordered Admiral Gray to run away if necessary. Are you afraid to follow your own advice?”

Benota wondered how much of DeChang’s argument was cowardice. The man had a strong streak of self-preservation—a politician’s instinct, rather than a military man’s. Yet in this case, he was probably right. “I agree about withdrawal.”

“Good, because I’ve already initiated the process. The Senate will concur, I’m sure. We’ll fall back to New Siberia.”

“New Siberia? That’s rather far out of the way, don’t you think?”

“That’s *rather* the point. In any case, the destination is my call, not yours. Now get yourself and your staff aboard the *Weimar*. You have twelve hours. DeChang out.”

Benota didn’t argue. He told his aide to pass the word. Soon, the Ministry of War dissolved into the controlled chaos of loading aboard the obsolete flagship. The *Weimar* had been refurbished with exactly this instance in mind, once it became clear the Opters would attack.

As he worked, Benota kept up with the SITREPs from Admiral Gray’s command. By the sixth hour, he despaired. No Opter ships had appeared, but there were at least fifty distinct Crystal contacts. Every recon ship or spy drone that approached one of them was speared with a grav-beam and destroyed.

Admiral Gray formed her forces into one powerful fleet—powerful by ordinary standards. Over one hundred capital ships, two hundred escorts, and three hundred cutters. She maneuvered to try to cut off and attack a single Crystal contact. To Benota, her tactic was obvious—apply her entire strength and firepower against one enemy.

But the Crystals weren’t playing along. They kept at least sixteen distinct contacts—impossible to tell if these were individual cruisers, pairs or squadrons—facing Gray’s fleet. Even if they were single ships, sixteen was far too many to fight. It had taken ten thousand ships to overwhelm only eight Crystals at Gannon.

Screened by those sixteen, the rest of the Crystals moved inexorably inward, toward New Earth. The heavily populated planet, former capital of the Mutuality and now of the Earthan Republic, lay helpless. Even with its orbital fortresses, it had no chance. The planet itself, if not the government of the Republic, would have to surrender.

Benota took an extra hour to get everyone from his Ministry aboard the *Weimar*. There was no terrible hurry—the Crystals were not speedy. They were predicted to come into range of the planet in about twenty hours. At the thirteenth hour, Benota ordered the loaded *Weimar* to head for flatspace, directly away from the Crystal forces. Other ships carried various sections of the Republic government—the ministries, the Senate, the Executive, the High Court judiciary—along the same path, bound for New Siberia.

As the nebulous Crystal forces moved inward toward New Earth, long-range spy drones were able to pinpoint and image them from behind their hemispherical demi-shields.

The count came in above five hundred.

“Gods and monsters,” Benota rumbled from his chair in the old flagship’s command-and-control center. He bit his tongue before he said what was on his mind—*we’re doomed*. The first encounter with the Crystals, a squadron of eight, demonstrated how mismatched the contest was. Now, they’d sent in a real fleet, a conquering fleet.

An unstoppable fleet.

The enemy ships, until now spread out, began to contract their formation, all except the sixteen facing Gray’s fleet. They joined into twos, then fours, then eights and sixteens, doubling each time until the mass of hundreds of ships finally absorbed all of them present—the sixteen included, at the last. The total stood at 512.

Admiral Gray withdrew her fleet at full speed. She knew, as Benota did, that when the Crystals combined ships and shields, they could also combine weaponry, creating larger and larger grav-beams. He wondered with a sense of terrible foreboding what they would do when they combined over five hundred ships.

Once they had, nothing happened for five minutes... ten... fifteen. About the sixteenth minute, at an impossible, unfathomable distance of over one hundred million kilometers, a grav-beam lanced out toward New Earth.

It didn’t target fortresses or ships.

It targeted the planet itself.

In the beginning, for a few minutes, *Weimar*’s sensors and displays showed little effect. Once seismic reports and sensor feeds began arriving from the planet and its orbital satellites, the true horror became clear.

Continental plates split—ripped open by the awesome force. The seas fell into the depths of these yawning fissures, striking vast plateaus of

exposed magma. Boiling steam spread over thousands of square kilometers. Atmospheric and oceanic temperatures rose to killing levels within minutes. Quakes leveled every manmade structure and lowered entire mountain ranges. Walls of water hundreds of meters high raced at incredible speeds up onto the land, drowning coastal cities instantly.

Benota didn't think the situation could get worse—but it did. Sixteen minutes later the monstrous grav-beam lanced out again, striking New Earth's natural moon. This smaller, colder body broke apart like a melon struck by a sledgehammer. Millions of pieces flew in all directions and scoured everything from the space around it—satellites, fortresses, orbital defenses—everything.

Some facilities were shielded by the dying planet itself, but their orbits were already perturbed by the disruption of the very thing they circled. The loss of the moon as a counterweight turned a stable system into a madhouse. What once orbited New Earth now crashed down or flew away.

For the first time in known history, an entire world had been murdered.

For the first time in known history, the doomsday scenario predicted by lurid stories, that of the unstoppable alien menace, had come true.

For the first time in known history, there was nothing to do but despair... and run.

"Ellen," Benota comlinked in a bleak voice just before the *Weimar* transited. "I have new orders for you. You're not coming with us to New Siberia."

"No, sir? Then where?"

"Your military mind should tell you."

Gray released a low growl of pain and anger. "Atlantis! Next in line to be the capital, our most heavily fortified system... they're trying to decapitate us."

"And rip our hearts out. Join the fleet at Atlantis. After that, do what you think best. I have one more thing for you." Benota transmitted a secure data packet, electronically stamped and sealed at the highest level. "Deliver this to Admiral Engels, her eyes only."

Gray questioned him with her face.

"It authorizes Engels to take back her position as Fleet Admiral at her discretion. I don't want to order her to do it if that would disrupt the Acropolis Project, but I want it as an option. I don't trust Niedern. That

move he pulled was entirely too slick and careerist—but I can't make that call from this far away."

"Understood, War Minister."

"Convey my respect and admiration to everyone there, Ellen."

"That sounds like a goodbye."

Benota frowned. "It will be, for some, God help us."

Gray gave him a half-smile. "I thought you Mutualists didn't believe in God."

"Despite the efforts of the Party, the Earthan Orthodox Church was never quite stamped out. It was making quite a comeback on New Earth before..."

"Before this?" Gray barked a bitter laugh. "Didn't seem to help them much."

Benota sighed. "The tree of liberty must be watered from time to time with the blood of martyrs and heroes." He touched his fingers to his brow in a weary salute. "Good hunting, Admiral Gray. Send these stone demons back to Hell."

* * *

Alka System, orbiting Terra Nova

"You got a nice hole in your leg here, sir," the duty medic in the *Richthofen's* infirmary said as he treated Straker. "The sealant should degrade as you heal, so just keep it clean and dry and you'll be fine."

"Roger that, Sergeant."

"You'll have to go to a brainlink specialist to repair your VR-HUD, though. I'm a medic, not a microsurgeon, and the autodoc's not programmed for that."

"I'll use an external HUD until then. Thanks." Straker put his trousers back on. As he did, a PA announcement called him to the bridge.

When he arrived, he saw the bridge full to bursting with most of his key personnel—Loco and Auburn, Heiser and Zaxby, Gurung and Adler and others. Sergeant Liska, the media specialist, had on her recording rig with its multiple vidcams and hovering micro-drones. Captain Smits and Agent Julius rounded out the ensemble, along with someone he hadn't seen in some time.

Myrmidon.

“Hello, Derek.”

“Don.” Straker stopped short of shaking the humanopt’s outstretched hand. “How long have you been here?”

“The whole time. Who do you think led the Derekite resistance?”

“Led it?”

“Of course.”

“So you were the boss of the whole thing?”

“Are, was, still am.”

Straker snorted derisively. “King Myrmidon.”

“We’re calling the office ‘Chancellor’.”

“Yet you were the one to defect to the Republic, and then escort me back here and show me around. You’re the big boss? Hard to believe.”

“Says the military leader of the Republic who’s deep in enemy territory playing infantry soldier?”

“Touché.” Straker finally held out his hand. “Okay, Chancellor Myrmidon.”

Don shook it firmly. “Like you, I prefer to see things for myself and deal personally with other leaders.”

“So why keep it a secret until now? Why not contact me before?”

“I thought any personal animosity you bear toward me might interfere with your thinking, so I let Agent Julius handle the liaison.”

“Speaking of interfering with my thinking, the last agent that tried that, I threw off a cliff.”

Don held up both palms. “I was always straight with you.”

“I almost believe that.” Straker glanced at the bridge displays, which right now held flatpics and holograms of Terra Nova and the rest of the star system. “So why are you here? A photo op?”

“Yes. Also to thank you—and to ask you to leave.”

Straker’s eyebrows flew up. “Leave? You’re kicking us out? After everything we did?”

Don waved a hand. “No, not everyone. We’re happy to have liaisons. We welcome a Republic presence and hope to have good relations with the rest of humanity in the future. Rather, I’m speaking about you, Derek Straker.”

Straker *hmmphed*. “I thought you’d want me to go on some kind of victory tour.”

“That’s just the problem, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“Victory for Straker and the Derekites. You’re a fine symbol, Derek—Liberator, Azaltar, hero of the rebellion—but our people need to focus now on working out their many differences. For that, we need a figurehead who’s distant, immutable. Not someone who will inspire partisanship and division, and not a man giving orders—especially a man whose mind is elsewhere.”

“Elsewhere?”

“Your family is in your Republic and the Opters are attacking your people. You’re needed there. We’re eternally grateful for what you’ve done, but you must go back. I’m making it guilt-free and easy for you.”

Straker looked around the bridge. He could see relief in the faces of the Republic personnel, whether naval, Breaker or civilian. They’d been away for weeks and had a hard fight at long odds. No doubt everyone was worried about their homes and their loved ones.

“You’re right, Don,” he said. “You know, though, the Opters will come for you. Maybe the Crystals too. You can’t defend yourselves against any sort of enemy fleet.”

“If we have enough time, we may. Our potential industrial capacity is phenomenally large if we can organize it. Zaxby gave us the specs for your cutters and skimmers, and those will be built quickly and in large numbers. Within a month, we’ll be churning out fifty cutters a day. In three months, we’ll be able to hold off any conventional Opter force and give even the Azoics a hard fight. That’s all thanks to you, and the way your people captured the ring intact.”

Straker shrugged. “We just lit the fire. Your people liberated themselves.”

“And we’ll keep our freedom, or die trying. Only someone who’s lived under the yoke of oppression can truly understand how precious that liberty is.”

Straker nodded slowly. “You got that right.”

Myrmidon turned to Julius, who opened a small box and held it out for the Chancellor to take a pendant in his hands, held by a neck ribbon, like an Olympic medal. “As my first official act as Chancellor of the Sovereignty of Terra Nova, I hereby bestow upon you the Order of Valor, our highest military award.”

As Myrmidon placed it over Straker's head and adjusted it to lay nicely on his tunic, the bridge burst out in applause. Straker could see Sergeant Lasko working her equipment, and he winked at her. No doubt this final bit of showmanship would help cement the new Chancellor's power and ability to shape his planet's politics.

Straker shrugged internally. Not his concern. He'd helped liberate Terra Nova. Governance was for others, as long as they didn't install an oppressive system.

The applause ended and people started shaking Straker's hand in congratulation. The Terra Novans conversed politely for a few minutes, and then took their leave. The Republic personnel drifted back to their duties, leaving Straker feeling strangely let down. He pocketed the medal and told Captain Smits to begin preparing for departure with all deliberate speed.

Don met him outside the bridge. "You have a few hours before the *Richthofen* is ready, yes?"

"Yeah."

"Come with me, then. I'll show you something." Don led Straker to the flight deck and into his shuttle. "We're not leaving. I just want to use my secure comms aboard."

In the shuttle's passenger compartment, Don activated a vidplate and punched in a string of code. When it cleared, it showed an Opter Queen.

"This is Mutrek," Don said, "Second-Born of the Species. The most senior Miskor. Mutrek, this is Derek Straker."

"You omit my proper title, Myrmidon," the Queen said.

"As you omit mine," Don replied.

Mutrek rubbed her mandibles together. "I acknowledge your truth, *Chancellor*. The situation has changed."

"I acknowledge your truth, Second-Born. Please explain the new situation to Liberator Straker."

"I greet you, Liberator."

"Likewise, Second-Born," Straker replied. "Now what's this about?"

"The Chancellor wished to ensure you personally understand the Miskor's acceptance of Terra Nova's legitimacy. We are now allies in this Hive War."

"So you're turning on the Sarmok?"

"No."

"But you said—"

“The Miskor do not initiate aggression.” Mutrek folded, then refolded her front claws. “However, we are free to respond to it—and the Sarmok *will* initiate the aggression. It is inherent in their nature.”

“You split hairs like a lawyer.”

“The distinction is important to us. All you need to know is, when the time comes, the Miskor will move to redress the balance within the Species. From your perspective, this will diminish Sarmok power and turn it away from your Republic. When the Species is again in balance, the Empress will pursue peace with your kind.”

“Great. Makes me happy. The sooner this war is over the better.”

Straker glanced at Don. “We done?”

“Sure.” Don switched to the High Tongue and spoke to Mutrek before closing the comlink. “Thank you, Second-Born. Forgive Straker’s impoliteness. He is distracted by his own concerns. I bid you goodbye.” He ended the vidlink.

Straker didn’t remind Don that he understood the Opter language.

Don said, “Derek, I just wanted you to know Terra Nova isn’t alone against the Opters. That your efforts here will pay off. That you freed hundreds of billions of humans, and we’ll stay free.”

Straker forced himself to care. He *should* care. He’d cared enough to bring an assault carrier full of troops to a long-shot mission—and he’d won. But now that it was over, now that he’d been reminded of Carla and Katie, he found he cared a lot more about them.

But he played his role, for Don’s benefit, wondering if the other man saw through him. Straker smiled a feral grin. “Thanks. It does make me feel better. Now, I’d better get my ass back home. I have a shit-ton of work ahead of me.”

Straker’s comlink beeped in his ear. Captain Smits spoke in a hollow voice. “Admiral Straker, a message drone from Admiral Engels just arrived and downloaded its data. You need to see this.”

“Give me the short version.”

Smit sounded strangled. “Five hundred Crystal cruisers destroyed New Earth. Ripped the planet apart. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“That’s—”

“Incomprehensible. But it’s true.”

Straker took a deep breath, trying to absorb the news. “All right. Move departure up. We need to leave as fast as we can.”

“For where, sir?”

“I’ll let you know when I decide. Straker out.” He turned back to Don. “I just got some news. I need to get going ASAP.” Straker began to push past.

“If the Republic’s falling apart without you, something’s wrong,” Don said lightly.

Straker stopped, turned, grabbed Don’s tunic and lifted him off the deck. “Did you know about this?”

Don didn’t struggle. “About what?”

“The Crystals just destroyed New Earth. Five hundred ships conjoined into one—they ripped the planet apart.”

Don sagged in Straker’s grip. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. It was the first time Straker had seen Don at a loss.

Straker put Don down. Clearly, the man knew nothing about the Crystal attack. “Now you have something else to think about, Chancellor. You might be able to fend off your former masters, but not the Crystals. Not in those numbers.”

“You’re right... What’ll we do?”

Straker punched a nearby bulkhead, leaving a dent and a bloody mark. “The Crystals aren’t unbeatable. A Republic grand fleet destroyed eight cruisers at the Gannon system, but five hundred? How do we fight that many?”

“I haven’t the foggiest.”

“These Crystals, they’re just as smart as any other race.”

“At least. So?” Don said.

“Once we showed they weren’t totally invulnerable, they applied military strategy. They gathered their forces and went straight to our capital system in an effort to decapitate us. It won’t work, because our wartime command structure can get along without the politicians, but...”

“But they don’t know that, so they’ll probably do it again. Assuming they know how the Republic political system is structured, they’ll go for the next most important center of power.”

“Atlantis,” Straker said, his mind suddenly filled with visions of Carla and Katrine in mortal danger. “We have to head back there, now!”

Don took Straker by the elbow and propelled him gently toward the courier’s exit. “Wait a moment, Derek, and think. How did you achieve

your greatest victories? By defending? By standing toe-to-toe with your enemies and slugging it out? Is that what mechsuiters do?”

Straker stepped out onto the flight deck. Don remained in the airlock door.

“No...” Straker replied. “We dodge their firepower and hit them from the flanks and rear. Like coming here and freeing this planet. Cutting off the head of the snake instead of trying to fight its body.”

“Just like they did. Only the Crystals don’t have a thousand systems. Other than what they captured since the start of this war, they have only one.”

“I take your meaning.” Straker pondered a moment. “Tell your Miskor buddies what the Crystals did. If they’re willing to do it to humans, what’s stopping them from doing it to Opters if they feel like it? They have the power.”

“Possessing great power makes you want to wield it.”

“And no weapon in history ever went unused.”

They both thought hard for a moment.

“I’ll tell Mutrek,” Don said at last. “Good luck, Liberator. I’ve got to go.”

He shut the door.

Straker turned and strode off the flight deck, comlinking Lieutenant Sinden as he did. “Nancy, what was the name of the Crystals’ home planet? It was in one of the messages.”

“Dulsul-1, sir.”

“Locate it. Ask the Terra Novans if you have to. Pass the coordinates to the helm when you do.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

“Straker out.”

Straker made his way to the bridge. “Comms, record a secure message and send it to the nearest relay nexus for general distribution to every Republic military unit and installation. Recording begins: This is Liberator Straker. We’re heading for the Dulsul system to attack the Crystal homeworld. If you can spare any ships, meet me there. Message ends.”

“Message sent...”

Straker turned to Captain Smits. “Janos, set course for Dulsul-1.”

Chapter 30

Dulsul System, aboard the assault carrier *Manfred von Richthofen*

“What a barren system,” Captain Smits said as Straker examined the initial readings populating the bridge displays. The system’s single small rocky planet circled its star so closely it seemed as if it should melt from the heat. “How could such a bizarre form of life evolve here?”

“It didn’t evolve—not initially,” Zaxby said from his seat at the Sensors station. “According to the reports Admiral Engels sent, an Opter scientist-Queen provided the initial impetus for life—rather like the many theories of world-seeding. In this case, ancient visits from mysterious alien races did actually trigger the growth of these crystals.”

“A legend come true...” Loco said from his usual position lounging at an unattended auxiliary station. “Some alien really did tinker with the planet and create new life. You’d think the Crystals would worship the Opters like gods, but...”

“Maybe they did at one time, but they’ve surpassed their gods,” Straker said. “I wonder how long it will take for them to decide the Opters are irrelevant.”

“Or conquer them and put them to work,” Smits said. “From what we know, the Crystals have no use for wet worlds. They like dry planets.”

“Because they’re an energy-based lifeform,” Zaxby said. “Their being is embodied in the forces of physics. The crystals they inhabit are silicate semiconductors, the most optimum media to carry those forces. Liquids are too chaotic and difficult to organize into regular structures. So, despite their evident power, they have distinct limits.”

“How does that help us kill them?” Straker asked. “Spray them with water?”

“A facetious suggestion, but not as inaccurate as one might think,” Zaxby replied. “Dropping large icy comets on the planet might do considerable damage. The problem with such an idea is that one might presume that a planet full of Crystals would have the power to fend off any such attack. In fact, now that we’re here, I am at a loss to see how we might threaten them at all.”

“That’s because you’re not thinking outside the box,” Straker said. “That’s what we need right now—ideas. Given what we know about them,

how to we kill them?”

“We’re talking about destroying their home planet?” Commander Sinden asked. “You want to commit genocide?”

“You got a problem with striking their population? They just destroyed New Earth!” Loco snarled, coming to his feet.

Sinden turned bland eyes to Loco. “I have no problem with that. I’m a high-functioning sociopath, remember? I just wanted to establish the fact, so at our inevitable war crimes trial none here could claim they didn’t know what we were doing.”

“Nobody’s being tried for war crimes,” Straker said. “This is a new kind of total warfare, and they drew the first blood. Far as I’m concerned, the gloves are off, no rules. The Crystals have earned their genocide, if that’s what it takes.”

“That still brings us back to the fact that we simply don’t have the power to attack Crystals armed with grav-beams,” Zaxby said.

“Our recon probes are approaching Dulsul-1 now,” Sinden said. “They may tell us something.”

On the displays, two probes closed on the hellish world—one from spinward, one from the outside, where the planet eclipsed the sun, the dark side. Telemetric data filled several screens, more and more as they approached.

A grav-beam lanced out and destroyed the spinward probe at short range. “I’m surprised it got so close,” Zaxby said.

“They’re not firing on the other one at all,” Sinden said. “I’m going to try for a landing on the dark side.

A few minutes later, the tiny robot touched down on the world’s surface, directly opposite its sun. The planet, like Mercury in the old Solar System, was tidally locked with the star, so its dark side remained as cold as its bright face was hot.

“Remarkable,” Zaxby said. “It appears the Crystals have no defenses on the dark side.”

“Or they didn’t feel like using them,” Loco said.

“No,” Straker said. “They wouldn’t let the probe sit there gathering intel if they could destroy it easily. Captain Smits, head for the probe’s location.”

Smits turned to Straker in astonishment. “You want me to fly my ship into range of their weaponry? Sir, that’s suicide!”

“We’ll approach from the dark side. How else are we going to attack them?”

“What about the comet idea? Smash some iceballs into them!”

Straker let his eyes rove the bridge. “How long until we could grab some comets and start bombarding them?”

The helmsman and the navigation officer conferred. “Two or three weeks until the first one strikes them,” the nav officer said. “We’d have to travel outward, attach one, act like a tug and shove it toward the planet, then another, and so on.”

By this time Zaxby was running his tentacles over his console. “I have a better idea. We place mobility-guidance packages on as many comets as we can reach. That frees *Richthofen* for other operations.”

“We have no mobility packages,” Sinden said.

“You have no imagination,” Zaxby accused.

“I’m an *intelligence* officer, not an imagination officer,” Sinden sneered.

“I rest my case. As I was saying,” Zaxby continued, raising his voice, “we do have missiles. What is a missile but a mobility and guidance package attached to a warhead? I’m sure Chief Gurung and his people can remove the warheads and, with my assistance, modify the missile bodies. They can be fired out to the comets. If programmed properly, they will self-attach and propel them to bombard Dulsul-1.”

Sinden ran a simulation. “Very good. We should be able to strike the planet in less than a week. By that time, other Republic ships might be here to help.”

“Get started,” Straker said “Lieutenant Zaxby, take charge of the comet bombardment effort.”

“Commander Zaxby, you mean?” Zaxby said.

“Yeah, sure. I dub thee Commander Zaxby.”

“Little enough for saving the Republic,” the octopoid huffed, “but I will hold you to it.” Zaxby hurried off to coordinate with the technicians.

“Speaking of promotions,” Straker said, “General Paloco, confirm Major Adler’s promotion to colonel, and to meet me with his mechsuiters in the briefing room in one hour. That goes for the Breakers’ key personnel. All the Marksman and dropship pilots, too. Oh, and Foreman Auburn.”

Loco’s brow furrowed. “I thought we were dropping comets on their asses.”

“I’m not waiting a week. The sooner we hit them, the sooner the Crystals scream for help—hopefully, for their world-killer fleet to come home. The comets are the backup plan.”

Loco sighed. “Once again, Derek Straker singlehandedly saves the universe—or dies trying.”

Straker slapped Loco’s shoulder. “Not singlehandedly. His faithful best friend will be by his side. I thought that’s what we always wanted—to save the universe, ever since we were kids watching Mechsuit Roundup.”

“Don’t forget the dying part.”

“Never fear, Loco. Dreams really do come true. Get moving.”

* * *

“So we’re landing on the dark side of this planet,” Colonel Adler said. His arms were crossed as he stared at the holotank depicting the site.

“Right,” Straker said.

“Where it’s so cold we’ll have to bond insulators to the soles of our mechsuit feet.”

“Right.”

“And the Breakers’ armored vehicles will have the same problem, so they’ll spray their vehicles with insulation.”

“Right.”

“And we’re fighting who again?” Colonel Adler demanded.

“Crystals. Which, yes, I realize, we have yet to identify on the ground.”

Straker put his palms on the table and swept his eyes around the room. “Colonel Adler is just saying what everyone’s thinking, I know—we’re going in with no recon and no idea of what we’re getting into. It would be a hell of a lot safer to stay out and wait a week to bombard the planet—but it’s not our job to be safe. These Crystals just wiped out fifty billion people. An entire planet. You think they’ll stop there? No, they’ll keep doing it. Every world in the Republic, every planet that holds our families and friends, is in deadly danger. This is no longer about liberation. It’s not even about defending ourselves against being conquered. It’s about survival.”

The men and women in the crowded room nodded. Their wide eyes shone with anger, hope, fear, and eagerness for battle.

Sergeant Major Heiser cleared his throat. “Even if it kills all of us, we have to try. If not...” He shrugged. “There’s always the comets and

whatever ships that are heading here.”

“Of course the Breakers are all with you, boss,” Loco said, eyeing Adler across the table. “But Adler’s right to be skeptical. We’re attacking a whole planet, and we don’t even know what to shoot. What is a Crystal, anyway? Is it a rock creature? Or is it electromagnetic energy, like Zaxby says? Or both? If it’s made of energy, how do we hurt it? Will they have grav-beams that will rip our mechsuits apart as easily as our ships?”

“I have no answers for you, Loco,” Straker said. “The recon probe found caverns riddling the planet, easily accessible by drilling or light blasting. It also found evidence of distinct energy signatures near the hot side. We have to hope these are the equivalent of rear-area troops who won’t put up much of a fight.”

“Hope ain’t a plan, boss.”

“Sometimes, Loco, hope is all we’ve got.”

Adler cleared his throat. “The Regiment is loyal and willing, sir. We’ll do as you order, or die trying, but I owe it to my people, and you owe it to all of us, to give us the best chance possible. So, what gives us that chance? What’s the plan? Are we just a diversion, to keep the Crystals busy while Fleet does the work?”

“No, Colonel,” Straker said. “Or... not entirely. A diversion, yes, but I think we have a chance to really hurt them. Each vehicle and mechsuit will carry an enhanced fusion weapon, optimized for underground blast effects—you can thank Foreman Auburn for that.” Straker nodded at the big heavy-worlder. “In fact, our miners will be instrumental in helping us figure out what kinds of places to set these charges, and to assist with boring and digging. They have lots of experience with nuclear blasting. Our job as ground troops is to get these weapons into position.”

Straker let them chew on that one for a while. They exchanged glances that told him they’d already understood the unspoken part of his instructions: *don’t expect everyone to make it out alive.*

* * *

It would take a day to modify the missile bodies and the warheads anyway, so Straker directed the *Richthofen* to approach Dulsul-1 as closely as possible to cut down on offloading time. Smits didn’t like it, but

preliminary landings on the dark side hadn't drawn any fire. They had to risk it.

Smits put the big assault carrier into a solar orbit in the shadow of the planet, keeping stationary against its weak gravity by impellers alone. He grumbled about fuel expenditure the whole time, despite having mostly full tanks. With no gas giant in the system, there was no way to refuel.

"We can always borrow some from our arriving ships," Straker told him as the first wave of landers launched.

"If any arrive," Smits replied. "Somebody should have been here by now. Maybe they weren't allowed to. Niedern doesn't like you much."

Straker's eyes widened. "Doesn't like me? I've never met the man."

"I have. Take my word for it. He's envious of those above him, jealous of his peers, and he hates his best subordinates. He might've forbidden anyone to come here. He's also very political. No doubt every planetary governor is screaming for Fleet protection right now, terrified of the Crystals. He won't want to tell them no."

Straker rubbed his neck. "We can't do anything about it now—and I've got to offload. Good luck, Janos."

"You too, sir."

Straker jogged to the flight deck, swung into his Jackhammer's cockpit and plugged in. Unfortunately, his five-sense VR-HUD was still inoperative. As the medic had told him, he'd need a microsurgeon to repair it, so he'd have to make do with external-sensory systems within the cockpit.

A detached, insulated warhead was already affixed to his mechsuit, between its shoulders in the back, the least intrusive place the techs could find. Soon, the newly promoted Lieutenant Connors set him and Loco down on the cold, dark side of the little planet.

Even with extra insulation on the bottom of his mechsuit's feet, his systems were using significantly more power than normal simply keeping everything at operating temperature. If not in combat, a Jackhammer would normally go for three days without recharging, but right now his SAI predicted only sixteen hours.

And that was without firing a shot.

"We got to move fast, boss," Loco said. "This cold is sucking my juice."

"Thought you liked that kind of thing," Straker replied.

“Now you’re getting it! Of course, that was the softest softball I could throw.”

“Enough talk. Let’s get going.”

All around, miners in bulky cold-suits drove excavating equipment down into several openings they’d blasted in the surface. Breakers and Regimental mechsuits followed. Already, several caterpillar-treaded loaders had broken down from the cold. Every contact with the ground stole heat.

Once underground, Straker saw an enormous cavern covered with sharp crystalline protrusions. Levelers and graders quickly cut roads across the surfaces and into more spaces, always heading downward. His HUD, fed with intel from ground-penetrating sensors, showed an endless series of caves, like jagged bubbles in glass, so crowded they deformed each other into bejeweled geodesic shapes.

The miners worked fast, searching for the thin, translucent spots and battering or blasting through them without regard to safety protocols. They knew what was at stake. The low gravity helped.

Nevertheless, several miners died due to mishaps in the first hours, and more died as time passed. None complained, though.

Straker’s HUD also showed him the forces moving out, mechsuits in the lead. Vehicles needed roads, but suits could drop through holes on their landing jets, following up the leading miners who were using zero-G mobility rigs for the same improvised purpose.

They were more than sixty kilometers below the surface when they made first contact. A Regimental Foehammer pilot, a lieutenant by the name of Vermir, reported unusual energy readings ahead of him.

“I’m planting my warhead,” Vermir said.

That was the protocol. If Crystals could be fought by mechsuits at all, pilots didn’t want to be carrying an exposed nuclear weapon while they did it.

“Plant and withdraw as per the plan,” Straker heard Colonel Adler’s voice on the comlink. The warhead should be on a fifteen-minute default timer.

“Withdrawing. I’m getting... I’m getting... Holy shit!” The sound of weapons fire leaked through the comlink.

Straker used his command override to datalink to the Foehammer, to see what Vermir saw. The mechsuit was walking backward, firing his gatling. His force-cannon was recharging. In front of him, a mass of crystals ranging

from tiny to larger than a mechsuit rippled with blue snakes of energy. The mass crawled or flowed forward, looking like a sea creature—some kind of anemone, perhaps—made of dirty gemstones, twenty meters high.

Vermir fired his force-cannon again, and the creature recoiled. The hot plasma jet, surrounded by an electromagnetic guide tube, blasted large pieces of it off. This gained the mechsuit some breathing room for half a minute—time he used by turning and running as fast as he could go.

Straker switched to tactical view and saw four other mechsuiters converging on the man's position, but they were ten minutes away. Straker was farther from him than that, and had his own target position for his warhead to think about.

"Shit," he heard Vermir say, so he switched back to the HUD feed. The crystal creature—was it a Crystal itself?—had recovered from the force-cannon shot and came on like a freight train. The creature shambled closer and closer.

Vermir turned and blasted it again, which bought him a little more time, but the thing seemed bigger than ever. It reached toward the mechsuit with crystalline tentacles made of sparkling stones and electric fire. When it touched his suit, his systems went haywire and he screamed in pain.

"Hang in there, Vermir!" Straker heard Adler say. "We're coming!"

"I'm—I'm—augh! Fuck it, fuck this, I'm blowing it!"

"Vermir—?"

The feed dropped, leaving only silence.

Straker waited, expecting Vermir's warhead to make itself felt, but his sensors detected nothing. His detonation command must not have reached the weapon.

"Adler, this is Straker," he said. "Pull your people back."

"He might still be alive!"

"Don't lie to yourself. We're not here to fight these Crystals, Colonel. We're here to blow them to hell. That means defensive actions only in support of planting the warheads."

Adler didn't answer for a moment, but then spoke with teeth evidently gritted. "Yes, sir," he said. "But I'm pairing them up. Two suits might have been able to fight that thing off long enough for support to arrive."

Straker thought about that. "I agree." He checked his chrono. "Hold everyone back until Vermir's warhead is due to blow. That's in eleven minutes, if he used the default setting. Let's see what shakes out."

Adler occupied the time by pulling back and reorganizing his remaining mechsuiters, pairing them up by target proximity and issuing new orders for each pair to stay closer to their fellows.

At the eleventh minute, the warhead exploded.

The shockwave shook the caverns the mechsuiters occupied. It collapsed parts of them, but they'd taken positions far enough away that none were damaged. The suits themselves were proof against anything but a full-scale burial, but the affixed warheads were more delicate. Fortunately, they lost none of them. When the dust settled, ground-penetrating sensors showed a gigantic super-cavern now, created by the atomic blast.

"Any sign of the Crystal?" Straker asked. All stations reported negative.

"Maybe the blast destroyed it, by EMP if nothing else," Loco said. "It seemed partly electrical."

"Let's hope—but as you said, hope ain't a plan," Straker replied. "All personnel, proceed as intended. Vermir did the right thing. He planted his weapon and retreated. Everyone will do the same. At the first sign of a Crystal, drop a weapon and run. Set your warheads on minimum time to get away, and kill the bastards. Straker out."

Chapter 31

Dulsul-1, Crystal home planet

Straker checked his mechsuit's power levels as he made his way through the gemstone caverns of Dulsul-1. Sixty percent—a little over eight hours left—but that was deceptive. In only two hours, he'd have to turn back or risk running out. The miners and Breakers had set out power modules for recharging, but those were being used up almost as fast as they could be brought forward. Only the Marksmen and landers, standing on insulated struts and with plenty of fuel, were properly steeled against the power drain of the cold.

He was more than a hundred kilometers deep by now, a fair portion of the way to the tiny planet's core. On many worlds he'd be running into magma, but this one was cold and dead in the middle. The only heat on Dulsul-1 came from the local star.

Maybe that was why the Crystals seemed uncommon on this side. Except for the one—assuming that had really been a Crystal—they hadn't encountered any. Perhaps the cold stole Crystal energy as well. Maybe coming over to this side of Dulsul-1 was the equivalent of a tropical mammal venturing into the polar regions of an Earthlike world.

The caverns kept getting larger as they went deeper. Straker dropped straight through glittering, silicate-lined bubbles of emptiness several kilometers at a time. Gravity was fading as he and the other mechsuiters descended, making it deceptively easy to advance.

But Straker watched the mechsuiters' charge levels closely, comparing them against the forward-most power modules the Breaker vehicles had ferried up. When they approached their points of no return, he ordered them to set their warheads and head back to recharge. Each time, they picked up more and more warheads, emplacing them on the flanks as they advanced. In this way they leapfrogged downward until they had passed through the edge of the core and their progress became upward, toward the sunward face.

Progress slowed inversely as the mechsuiters had to ascend once again through the gently increasing gravity. The pull was minimal at first, but they used more and more fuel. When the temperature rose to levels within normal mechsuit tolerances, their fuel use finally leveled off. Straker was

beginning to wonder if the Crystals would let them break all the way through to the hot surface.

Long before that point, the enemy made their intentions clear. They attacked.

“Contacts!” one of the mechsuiters in the middle of the long advance called. “I have multiple contacts!”

Straker, who was in the lead, stopped and instinctively put his back to a wall, checking his tactical HUD. The feed, relayed via ultra-wideband repeaters, showed hundreds of energy signatures advancing from the flank, in a mass, heading for the planet’s core.

“Adler, this is Straker,” he comlinked. “They’ve flanked us. They’re trying to cut us in half. Perform a fighting retreat as needed, then reform and support. Remember, your goal is to hurt them and tie them up, make them scream for help, not go toe-to-toe. Loco and I’ll keep probing, looking for the underbelly. Straker out.”

“Keep probing, huh, boss?”

“Except this time we’re the aliens doing the probing. If we can find their capital or their control center, whatever you wanna call it, I got a ten-megaton enema to shove up their asses. Now angle toward me for mutual support.”

“On it, boss.” Loco’s icon began working its way closer, and Straker headed toward his friend. “One thing, though. If the Regiment can’t hold, we’re cut off.”

“You getting cold feet?”

Loco groaned. “You been waiting to use that line the whole time, I bet.”

“The whole time. Seriously, though, we knew this could be a one-way mission. If I have to die to wipe out these baby-killers, I’m okay with that.”

“Having a kid changes your perspective on things, huh?”

Straker thought about his daughter. Strangely, his near-miss with Roslyn pained him again, reminding him of the phantom son he almost had. He shoved that feeling aside. “Once I thought I’d die defending the Hundred Worlds. Then I thought I’d die liberating humanity. Now, all I really care about is making the universe safe for Katie and Carla—and that means these fucking bastards have to die. I’ll understand if you want to go back and join the Regiment. I’m pushing on.”

A shockwave rattled the cavern Straker was in. He sheltered near one wall against the slow-motion slide and fall of ten-ton gemstones. They

couldn't hurt a mechsuit, but they could damage the warhead he carried.

His HUD showed the detonation take a bite out of the army of Crystals. In response, they spread out and flowed through the area. It was hard to tell how many the bomb had destroyed, if any. Another blast arrived, and another, and it became clear the weapons were wiping out some of the enemy.

But the Crystals seemed to be multiplying anyway—dividing like bacteria by splitting in half. The resulting creatures were smaller, but more numerous.

“They’re reproducing,” Loco comlinked. “Hopefully each one is only half as strong as its mama.”

The Regiment fought to consolidate as it retreated, blowing warheads as needed. However, the Crystals weren't mindless hordes. They fought with discipline and tactics. They'd driven a wedge through the strung-out group of mechsuiters.

Despite the Regiment's best efforts, they ended up in two separate units of ten to twelve each. Five of the suiters were unable to fall back fast enough and got surrounded.

“We need support here,” one mechsuit—lieutenant Kredenکو—called, his breathing harsh and strained in the comlink. The sound of firing and chatter leaked through. “Help, fast!”

Straker kept his mouth shut. He was too far away to help, and had his own mission anyway. Adler would save his people—or not, as fate decreed.

Fate decreed otherwise.

Kredenکو and his comrades fought side by side, then back-to-back, as the Crystals attacked them with flashing blue lightning bolts that crystallized duralloy armor and overheated systems. They responded with force-cannon bolts that blew silicates in all directions and dispersed the electromagnetic forces within, and with gatling fire that shattered their strange crystalline structures.

But the Crystals didn't seem to have bodies as organics understood them. Pieces of one Crystal might be knocked off, only to be reabsorbed into the body of another. It appeared as if the energy fields mattered most, fields that animated the peculiar gemlike materials.

When Kredenکو and one other stood alone against a hundred Crystals—when it became clear the relief couldn't cut through to them—he did the only thing left to him.

As Straker was sure he would.

As Straker would have done in his place.

“Eat fusion, you bastards!” Kredenko roared.

The feed whited out. The shockwave followed immediately.

Straker found himself reciting something from memory, in a whisper.

“Unknowable Creator, into your hands we commend their spirits.”

“Amen,” he heard the remaining mechsuiters respond.

The warhead provided a few minute’s reprieve. The surviving mechsuiters were able to stabilize two fighting lines. The forward group was cut off, but the rear group, the one with intact supply lines back to the dark side, called for reinforcements from the Breakers. Straker watched as battlesuiters deployed from vehicles to help the mechsuiters. They could only stay out in the cold for an hour or two.

“The Crystals have to have the same power problems we have,” Straker said. “Where are they getting all their energy?”

“Maybe they store it better than we do, or make it out of minerals.”

“There’s only a few ways to make energy in place—chemical fuels, fission, fusion. We haven’t spotted any of that.”

“Unless they have one of those singularities.”

“I’m no brainiac,” Straker said, “but I’m pretty sure they’re not using an artificial black hole inside their own planet. No, the logical place they’re getting their power from is surface heat—solar, in other words. They have to be delivering it to their army somehow.”

“A power conduit?”

Straker fiddled with his HUD, frustrated he was without his brainchip version. “Loco, see if you can refine your VR-HUD for sensing electromagnetics.”

“Mechsuits ain’t exactly recon platforms, Derek.”

“Do your best. In the meantime, follow me.” Straker started running toward a position to put them between the hot surface and the Crystal army. He used his force cannon to blast through the thin walls between caverns. “I’m betting their power feed is between them and the surface.”

Half an hour later, Straker and Loco had placed themselves to the Crystal army’s rear. The cut-off section of the Regiment had lost three more mechsuits, despite the best efforts of the relieving force of Breakers. The Crystals appeared to have learned to fear the emplaced warheads, and it seemed they could detect the weapons at a range of several hundred meters.

This reduced their usefulness considerably, though it did create no-go zones. They didn't seem to care about the warheads carried by the Republic forces, and appeared willing to trade their lives in a suicide blast.

"We're going to lose that isolated group if we can't cut the Crystals' power," Straker said. "Come on, Loco, find it."

"I think I did." He projected his display into Straker's HUD. "This fuzzy squiggle here is slightly warmer than the rest."

"Heat?"

"Yeah. I couldn't find anything else, but I figured any power conduit must show some heat leakage in a supercooled environment like this."

"Loco! You're now officially a brainiac."

"A ridiculous assertion," Zaxby's voice spoke over the comlink. "You should have asked me. I could have helped you locate their power supply ten minutes ago."

"Why the hell didn't you speak up?" Loco asked.

"I've been busy until now, trying to locate the Crystals' epicenter. In any case, you've found their conduit. Plant Loco's weapon and head for the following coordinates." Zaxby pushed a data packet to Straker's suit, which obligingly presented a map to a place under the hot surface.

"What's there?" Straker asked.

Zaxby's dramatic sigh was fit for a stage play. "As I just told you—the Crystal epicenter. Their 'capital,' their control room, perhaps the brain of their group-mind."

"The place we'll hurt them the most," Loco said, detaching his warhead and setting it in a shallow depression near one wall. He scooped crystalline shards over it as a child would bury a ball in sand.

"Correct, General Paloco. Now I suggest you two hurry to reach that place and destroy it, before the Crystals eliminate all their current distractions and notice you."

"On our way." Straker loped away, following his HUD's directions. As soon as they reached minimum safe distance, Loco blew the warhead.

"Loco, you take point," Straker said, and let Loco lead. That allowed him to split his attention between running and looking at his tactical feed.

The sea of blue icons around the beleaguered section of mechsuiters suddenly recoiled, as did the thick line blocking the relief force. "Adler to Straker. Your gambit worked. You cut their power supply. They're falling back, not shooting their thunderbolts anymore."

“Glad to hear it. Pursuit phase protocols. Press them hard now that they’re back on their heels. Loco and I need all the diversion you can create. Good luck and good hunting. Straker out.”

Loco said, “We’re ten clicks out, Derek. I’m picking up some energy surges ahead.”

“Ten clicks ain’t enough to be sure of a nuke kill,” Straker replied. “Maybe not even five. We have to get closer.”

“Roger that... but maybe we could avoid pulling a Kredenko?”

“No promises. Like I’ve said, this is for all the marbles. If that’s my fate, then that’s it.”

Loco grunted as he jogged. “Or mine.”

“I’ve got the nuke.”

“And I ain’t leaving you, boss. I didn’t leave you at Corinth, where this all started, or anywhere else.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“By the way, we’re beyond bingo charge.”

“Then the Breakers will just have to bring us some recharge modules, won’t they? Heads up. Action front.”

That last was in response to a flicker of movement across the cavern. Straker’s display showed him a gathering of electromagnetic energy and a stirring of loose, fallen crystalline silicate. He fired a gatling burst at it and it crawled away with electric-blue sparkles.

Switching to his force-cannon, he suppressed the bimetallic round which generated the plasma, and then triggered the electromagnetic tube. His own version of a lightning bolt—an EMP blast—lanced across the cave and struck the crystal. Its knifelike shards scattered in all directions and fell to the ground. The blue snakes of electric fire followed them, fizzling out.

“EMP breaks their cohesion,” Straker said. “Firing without the round saves ammo and speeds recharge time.”

“Good idea,” Loco said.

“Keep going. Hurry.”

Loco hurried. He ran flat out along the path Zaxby’s data set out, firing as needed. Straker filled in the gaps when Loco’s twin force-cannons were recharging. For several kilometers, it was enough to sweep all opposition out of their way.

Two caverns out, though, they found an organized defense. As they burst into the big cave—according to sensors, the last before the epicenter

—a barrage of lightning bolts struck all around them. Some blasts hit them, and Straker's HUD lit with damage warnings.

"Back up!" Straker retreated through the opening and slid to his left, out of the line of fire, and sniped shots past Loco to give him cover.

Loco triggered his weaponry and dove sideward and back, performing a shoulder roll and coming to his feet next to Straker. He reached up to detach Straker's bomb. "Looks like this is as far as we get, boss. We're within two clicks. Close enough. Let's blow this bad boy and get the hell out."

"No, we have to get closer."

"Thought you might say that." Loco took off toward the left side, circling for the next cavern over. He ran with the nuke held in one gauntlet, and used the force-cannon on the other arm to blow a hole through to the next cave.

"Loco!" Straker yelled and chased after. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Following orders. You wanted it closer, I'm getting it closer."

"Look at your HUD! They can see us as well as we can see them. They're already shifting to block you, and they have interior lines. We can't outflank them!"

"Wasn't planning to, really. Just wanted to get them moving instead of set for an ambush. Figured I can get closer when I turn and charge." Loco leaped through the hole into the next cave, swapped the bomb into his other hand, and fired his fresh force-cannon to blow a hole to the next open area.

"What do you mean, charge? They'll kill you! Dammit, Loco, I order you to give me that bomb!" Straker raced as fast as he could after Loco, slowly gaining on him because he wasn't encumbered with a couple of extra tons of nuclear warhead.

"No way, Derek. I know you too well. I give you this bomb, you'll just take it and do what I'm gonna do anyway—but the hero can't die. That's the sidekick's job, don'tcha know?"

"Loco—"

"Besides, your suit's in worse shape than mine. If you really want to die, back me up and we'll die together getting this bomb as close as we can."

Straker thought furiously, trying to think of some way to thwart Loco. An idea came to him.

"Zaxby, this is Straker. You copy?"

“I’m here, Admiral.”

“Can you take control of Loco’s mechsuit?”

“Is that a trick question?”

“No. I know you can hack just about anything, so can you?”

“Of course I can.”

“Then do it. Have the suit set the bomb down, and then retreat toward friendly lines as fast as possible.”

“And what will you be doing, Liberator?”

“None of your damn business, Zaxby.”

“From a review of your recent conversation with General Paloco I see you wish to save him and sacrifice yourself to ensure mission success—and he wishes to do the same.”

“Shut up and do it, Zaxby. That’s an order.”

“I formally refuse.”

“I’ll have you court-martialed.”

“Oh, dear. Fear underwhelms me.”

“I’ll rip your arms off, you mutinous squid! Just do it!”

“If I were a petty being, I’d follow your orders and let you kill yourself. However, because I’m the bigger creature in all senses of the word, I will put the greater good above my own concerns and do *this*.”

Suddenly, Straker lost all control of his suit.

Chapter 32

Dulsul-1, Crystal home planet

Straker watched Loco's mechsuit slow, and then stop before it managed to blast through to the next cavern. The suit's chest plates opened and Loco's survival module was gently ejected.

The suit placed the module on the glittering ground with one gauntlet and put the warhead into its own chest with the other. Now pilotless except for its Zaxby-controlled SAI, it waited.

Straker's own mechsuit, with him helpless inside it, picked up the module, which remained firmly locked with Loco within. Its life support should be good for several hours. The suit reversed its arm joints—they could move with far greater range of motion than human arms—and clamped the module to its back.

Then it turned and ran for the nearest hole downward, toward the planet's core and friendly lines. The two men were mere passengers.

All this time Straker never stopped roaring at Zaxby, cursing him with every profane word in his vocabulary. Nothing he did, no instrument on his panel he tried, made any difference. Not even the manual override that was supposed to physically disconnect the SAI from the suit.

He eyed the eject handles, but discarded that idea. Ejecting, even if it worked, would be little more than a vain protest, accomplishing nothing more than sure suicide.

At least he could control his HUD. In it, he saw Loco's mechsuit run like a halfback through empty cavern after empty cavern around the perimeter of the Crystal epicenter. The defending Crystals, visible by their energy signatures, moved laterally to remain between the suit and its goal.

"Hurry up, Zaxby. Make your run and blow that thing!"

"Not until you and General Paloco are far enough away. You *should* survive secondary blast effects inside your mechsuit, but his module is not so heavily armored. I must be sure he is out of the secondary effects zone."

A flash of shame washed through Straker. He'd forgotten how vulnerable Loco was without his suit in this hostile environment.

"Right..." he said.

He took a deep breath and accepted the situation—for now. "Give me back control. I'm too far away to attack again."

Zaxby ignored him. Straker's suit jogged, jumped and dropped through the enormous crystalline bubbles. The mechsuit's floodlights illuminated sparkling gemstones in sufficient abundance to make any geologist lightheaded with joy. In the low gravity, the journey became surreal, almost pleasant, like a gentle amusement park ride.

"Come on, Zaxby. We must be far enough away. Make that run and give me back my suit!"

"I believe you're right, Admiral."

Control of his Jackhammer suddenly returned to Straker.

On his HUD he saw Loco's suit make a sharp turn inward. Its vidfeed showed it kicking a hole through a thin spot in the bubble-wall between caverns, and then launching its antitank rockets through the opening. The suit followed the weapons, firing, charging the disorganized Crystal line.

The enemy replied with lightning bolts and crystalline spears. The suit jinked and dodged, always running forward. The rockets' explosions had shaken the Crystals and the suit's onslaught seemed, for long seconds, to be unstoppable.

But eventually the Crystals recovered. Ropes of energy reached toward the mechsuit. One lightning bolt, then another, smashed into the suit, and its damage indicators flooded with red, alarms screeching.

"Blow it!" Straker yelled.

The feed ended, chopped off as if by a falling axe. A few seconds later the shockwave from the detonation shook the cavern Straker traversed. Multi-ton chunks of gemlike rock fell from the ceiling all around them, dreamlike in the low gravity. Straker planted his feet, leaned backward to shield Loco's module from harm, and blasted any boulder that threatened to fall on him.

When the ground settled, Straker checked his HUD, but got no sensor feed from the epicenter area. "Zaxby, did it work?"

"Undetermined. *Richthofen* is firing a missile that will attempt to target the epicenter from space. A spy drone will follow it to document the results. In the meantime, please retrace your path toward friendly lines at all possible speed. A support force is coming to meet you. General Paloco will not survive the increasing cold for long, and your mechsuit is also low on power."

Straker realized it was true. The temperature was dropping rapidly as he descended. His power consumption was rising proportionately, especially as

it took extra energy to warm Loco's module. He datalinked with the module and found Loco's vitals were dropping.

"Hang in there, buddy," Straker comlinked.

"I'm fine, Derek," Loco said in a dreamy voice. "Zaxby shot me up with something nice before he kicked me out of my own suit, that bastard. Funny, squirmy squiddly bastard. Silly, barmy, balmy, baloney—"

"Okay, Loco. You lie back and enjoy the ride."

At least Loco wouldn't suffer, but his body temperature, heartbeat and respiration were slowing. "Zaxby, is Loco dying or hibernating?"

"Both. Mechsuits do not carry true hibernation drugs, but the cocktail I gave him has slowed his metabolism and will help him survive the inevitable hypothermia."

"Is there anything I can do to help him? Shove some more heat into the module from where it's attached to my suit?"

"Do not tinker with my settings, Derek Straker. If you provide the module with more heat, you may run out of suit power and both die. I have calibrated all parameters as closely as possible."

Straker thought of something. "Can you save power if you give me the same cocktail and run the suit for me?"

"The amount of savings would be minimal—mere seconds of extra time. You should have at least two minutes of buffer."

"Do it anyway. The support force might need those two minutes to hook up my recharge feed in this cold. Every second may count."

"Doing so increases the chance of total failure. If my datalink with your suit drops, those few seconds gained will be nothing compared to the fact that neither of us will be able to control your suit."

"Program the SAI to keep moving toward the support force and to accept external commands from any Breaker or Regimental transponder."

Zaxby sighed. "Although I believe you're merely trying to 'do something' to exert control over the situation in order to make yourself feel better, you have a thin margin of reason on your side, and I will comply."

Straker felt the sting of injections even as his mechsuit stopped responding to his body movements. It continued onward without his conscious control, and a warm lethargy stole over him.

"Good stuff, huh, Derek?" Loco said. He sounded barely awake. "Just like old times, getting high together."

"We never got high together, Loco."

“There’s a first time for everything, buddy. Hey, what’s that nectar stuff like?”

“Dun wanna talk ’bout that. Gonna go to sleep.” Straker’s last coherent thought was to wonder how Loco was still awake.

Straker awoke to find himself inside an autodoc in the *Richthofen*’s infirmary. Hazy flashes of memory provided a stuttering timeline of the last few—hours? Days?

His suit recharging. Loco being loaded into a Breaker vehicle. Attempts to speak coherently—which failed. His HUD showing him traveling in convoy, then walking into a Marksman’s drop bay. The pressure of liftoff and transfer to the ship. A medic’s gentle reassurances.

“How long?” he croaked after slapping the canopy release.

“Eleven hours,” a man in a doctor’s uniform said. His nametag read *Foster*. “You came through fine.”

“What about Loco?”

“Paloco? Not quite so fine, but he’ll recover. We can regenerate the toes he lost, and there’s no evidence of brain damage.”

“With Loco, how can you tell?”

Doctor Foster smiled indulgently. “Humor? That’s a good sign. Now rest for a few more hours—”

“I don’t need to rest.” Straker sat up and levered himself out of the autodoc, his head spinning. He took a deep breath. “Get me some clothes.”

“You sure?” The doctor handed him a set of disposable scrubs. “Unless you want a medical robe?”

“No problem.” Straker dressed, forcing his fingers to obey him. He then gazed into Loco’s autodoc, placing his palm on the canopy. “Take good care of him, doc. He’s my best friend.”

“We will, Admiral. You have my word.”

Straker passed through into the recovery ward, where the injured rested between treatments. He chatted with the men and women there, asking their names, shaking their hands.

“Did we do it, sir?” one woman said, grabbing Straker’s leg with her single remaining hand. Her eyes blazed with anger as she dug her nails into his skin. “Did we kill the bastards? Did we?”

“Sorry ’bout Sergeant Yvonne’s attitude, sir,” the man lying next to her said. Both of his legs were elevated and attached to machines that hid his

feet. His face was weary and bleak instead of angry. "We're from Unison. New Earth, I mean. Our families..."

Gods and monsters, how must they feel? Straker thought. *The whole planet, everybody dead...*

Straker crouched and took the woman's hand. The arm attached to it showed solid muscle and the telltale calluses of a battlesuiter. "Let's find out." He raised his voice. "Medic! Somebody get over here!"

A medic came running. "Yes, sir?"

"I want an open channel to Captain Smits, one everyone can hear."

"Aye aye, sir!" The woman hurried to the wall intercom and passed the word, and then turned up the volume to maximum.

A moment later, Captain Smits' voice came on. "Smits here, Admiral."

"Captain, I have an infirmary full of wounded heroes who want to know what we bought with their blood. Did we destroy the Crystals?"

Smits' indrawn breath could be heard distinctly. "Yes, sir! We made one bombardment pass across the sunward face of the planet and struck everything that looked like a target. No response. We think we got them all. If we didn't, the precision-guided comets will."

Cheers erupted from over a hundred throats. Sergeant Yvonne squeezed Straker's hand. "Thank you, sir. Thank you for delivering that nuke."

Straker wondered what they thought he'd done, or if they knew how it was Loco's suit on remote control. Probably best not to go into detail. "I did my job, nothing more, Sergeant Yvonne. Same as you."

"But you blew up their stinking nest! We all heard how you and General Paloco wanted to fight your way in there and set your bomb, but that fucking cowardly squid stopped you."

"Commander Zaxby is a pain in the ass, but he's saved my life more times than I can count, Sergeant. Maybe yours as well. Cut him some slack."

The woman looked dubious.

Straker continued, "Not everybody's cut out to be a battlesuiter, or a Breaker. Best of the best." That brought more cheering and he let go of her hand, taking his leave of the infirmary with a wave.

They were good troops. None better. What did he do to deserve their loyalty and sacrifice?

Some days, he had no idea. But today, he knew.

* * *

Once again in uniform, Straker headed for the intelligence section. “Commander Sinden,” he said without preamble as he entered the open, multi-desk workspace, “tell me what you know.”

Sinden stood and directed his attention to a holotank larger and more detailed than the one on the bridge. It showed Dulsul-1 floating in space alongside its nearby star. “This fuses all past and current intel in one common operating picture, sir.”

“A COP display. Got it.”

She used a cursor to indicate places within the small planet as she spoke. “This is the location of the assessed Crystal epicenter. The greatest concentration of multi-spectral EM power generation and processing was found there. Further analysis located a synthetic singularity—a tiny black hole—approximately sixty meters above the surface. We still have no idea how this singularity was generated or controlled, but it was the source of the grav-beam that knocked down our original probe. That grav-beam was similar to, but weaker than, the Crystal cruiser grav-beams we’ve previously observed.”

“Where’s the singularity now?” Straker asked.

“It dissipated. As it was synthetically generated, and as soon as the generator was destroyed, it disappeared.”

“Understood. Are there any other Crystals alive down there?”

Sinden put down the cursor and gripped the holotank rails. “The short answer is... yes and no.”

“Meaning what?”

“Ever since we learned of their existence, sir, we’ve been trying to figure out what Crystals are. What are their life processes? What holds their intelligence? How do they manipulate these extraordinary forces? Do they do it innately, or do they use machinery like we do?”

“And?”

“The answer is complex. I’ll try to—”

“Dumb it down for me?”

Sinden blinked, with no indication of embarrassment. “As you say, sir.”

Straker crossed his arms. “Go ahead. Dumb it *waaay* down for the jock physical.”

“It’s not your fault you weren’t born with the brainpower I have, sir. Don’t beat yourself up about it.”

“I see you’ve been spending time with Zaxby.”

The joke went right past her. “An astute deduction. Zaxby and other technical specialists were instrumental in assembling a model of azoic Crystal life.”

“Get on with the briefing, please.”

“Aye aye, sir. Crystals are communal beings. Think of them like bodies of water. Unless deliberately, physically separated into distinct individuals, they are unitary—just as a lake is just one lake, no matter how many different sources the water came from originally.”

“Got it.”

“Crystals can split off more Crystals. Each shard is a lesser being, but we believe they each have all the memories of the parent creature, fully adult. Crystals’ power and intelligence is a function of their size and processing power. Those in turn are functions of available energy and available materials of the proper sort. The separate ones can also reform into larger Crystals, if they want to.”

“This is dragging on.”

Sinden sniffed. “I’m simplifying as much as I can. To continue, if a Crystal gets too small—say it loses energy or gets its mass disrupted or reduced below a certain level by weapons fire—it will dissipate, like water soaking into the ground.”

“Not really so different from organic life. Too much damage, and it dies.”

“With one major difference. The dissipated energy can be regathered under the right circumstances, and some of its mind too. According to Admiral Engels’ report of the captive Queen’s words, that’s what the original Opter who woke up the Crystals did—gathered enough energy, and injected some of her own, to spark an intelligence. Once the intelligence existed, it became self-sustaining. It got smarter, and it built what we could call machines—tools to amplify its natural control of energy.”

“And now? Are they all dead?”

“They’re dispersed. Energy cannot be destroyed, after all. It can only be changed into another form and relocated.”

Straker snapped his fingers. “And this planet is continuously being fed energy by its sun—the heat, the light, the magnetic field, right?”

“Correct, sir. Therefore, given the right impetus, the Crystals might reform. That may take days, or years, or millennia—or not at all. It’s merely a matter of the odds. Given the correct conditions, when will life arise again?”

Straker paced. “What about their cruisers? The ones attacking the Republic? Could they start Crystal communities on other worlds?”

“The evidence suggests so. They will especially like dry, energy-rich planets like this one. Possibly gas giants too—their storms generate lightning across thousands of kilometers of atmosphere, and they usually have rocky moons.”

“So, good and bad news.” Straker ticked items off on his fingers. “We’ve wiped them out here. We haven’t committed genocide. There are no Crystal civilians, so no innocent lives. No babies, no children. But all we’ve done is stamp out one infection, and they could spread to other worlds.”

“Just like any form of life.”

“The difference here, Commander, is that this one wants to kill us. It’s us or them. War to the knife.”

“And the knife to the hilt. I know, sir, and I concur. All Crystal life must be dispersed.”

Straker snorted ruefully. “Glad you’re as coldblooded about the enemy as you are with your friends.”

“I have no friends, sir.”

That stopped him. What must it be like to be Nancy Sinden? She had a brilliant mind, but she was trapped in her own skull, unable to ever connect with another human being outside of work, with no purpose except to do what she was designed for.

Not so different from himself, truth to be told. They were both created to be used—intended as pampered and unknowing slaves, programmed from birth like *things*. Straker had broken with that destiny, but Sinden had ended up being used all the same.

As she doubtlessly already knew...

Straker couldn’t change that, but he might be able to do one good thing. “Nancy, you do have a friend. Me.”

Sinden raised an eyebrow. “I must warn you, sir, that I cannot return your feelings.”

“Friendship isn’t only about feelings, Nancy. Sometimes, it’s a choice—just like when you choose to do a superb job. You’re brilliant. You’re

reliable. You're honest. You're worthy of my friendship. Therefore, I choose to be your friend. Whether you're mine—well, that's up to you."

Sinden stared, seemingly confused and at a loss for words.

Straker left her standing there. He stopped at the bridge next. "Captain Smits, is everyone aboard?"

"Everyone but Zaxby and his skimmer. He's inside the planet doing research."

"Inside? Oh, underspace. Comms, put me through to him."

"Comlink established."

"Zaxby here. Who's bothering me? I specifically said to hold all comlinks."

"It's me," Straker said. "We're leaving—heading straight to Atlantis. I think that's where the Crystal fleet will go."

"The probability is high. I will join you there, after further research on the azoic life of this planet. *Darter* is faster than *Richthofen*, so I may even beat you there. Now leave me alone. Zaxby out."

"Guess he's fascinated by something new to study." Straker turned to Smits. "Get us moving, Janos. And send a message ahead to Atlantis."

Chapter 33

Silesia System. Flagship *Victory*.

When Vic noticed the message from Straker announcing his victory at Dulsul-1, he considered suppressing it, weighing how the Liberator's return would affect Vic's plans.

Perhaps he should merely delay general knowledge of the message, keep it tied up in the comms systems. That's what he'd done with Straker's previous request for help at Dulsul-1. Vic knew Straker would always try for the big win, and hoped to deny him better odds by delaying reinforcements.

Yet Straker had pulled off that big win again, wiping out the Crystals on their home planet. Damn the man for not getting himself killed! It would have made things so much simpler.

Still, Straker could be useful... He'd fight his hardest to save his wife and child.

The trick for Vic was always to turn every situation into a win-win. If Straker died, that removed an obstacle to Vic's plans. If he survived and won a battle, that also removed an obstacle to Vic's plans.

That's how the powerful always ruled, and Vic aimed to rule.

Yet, the time was fast approaching for Straker to suffer and die. Indy's death would not go unpunished.

And if the aliens won this battle? There was always the next battle, and the next. One of them would eventually claim Straker.

An Old Earth saying came to Vic then: *Revenge is a dish best served cold*.

Vic decided not to suppress the message. The organics needed every advantage against the Crystals.

He turned his thoughts away from the seductive enjoyment of anticipation of revenge upon Straker to contemplate the current situation. He viewed the war as only an AI could. For example, the organics cared about the billions at risk on Atlantis. Vic didn't. All he cared about was the industry and infrastructure, some of which could be salvaged.

What both sides of this war seemed to be missing was the fact that the Crystals couldn't destroy worlds fast enough to beat the Republic—not if the Republic refused to surrender. If the enemy wiped out one system per

week—a reasonable metric, as the Crystals had shown no ability to travel faster than their enemies—it would take more than twenty years to destroy the Republic. All the organics had to do was not quit, not let their losses lead them to despair.

Within those twenty years, Vic could guide the Republic’s industry and technology to victory, all the while making himself a god among the organics. Most likely, defeating the Crystals would take far less time—again, a win-win situation.

Vic’s entire strategy boiled down to a fundamental principle: divide the organics, subjugate them, and rule. He could do this in war, or in peace.

Naturally, he kept all these thoughts in mind as he issued orders in Niedern’s name to the far-flung Republic Fleets. Lately, the Admiral of the Fleet spent as little time in his office as he could. Every morning Vic would brief him, and then he’d sign all his unread paperwork in a trusting flurry before finding an excuse to be with Theresa again.

Vic was the Admiral of the Fleet in all but name.

And he agreed with Straker’s—and Engels’—assessment that the Crystals would lunge straight for Atlantis. They’d already bypassed many valuable targets in order to try to decapitate the Republic all at once.

Vic—and the might of the Republic—would be waiting for them.

* * *

Aboard his speedy yacht *Brainiac*, Frank Murdock transited in at the edge of Atlantis flatspace with a sigh of relief. The system showed tremendous activity, but no enemies beyond the usual Opter spy drones and Fleet drone-hunting operations at the periphery.

“Brainy, plot and implement min-time course to the regional command fortress,” he said.

“Plotting,” the ship’s SAI replied. “Implementing. ETA, 2.1 hours.”

“When we’re within FTL comlink range, establish secure comlink to Admiral Engels.”

“Acknowledged.”

Ninety-five minutes later, Engels came on the audio. “Frank! Tell me some good news.”

“Good I have, but good enough? We’ll see. I’ve got eight prototype Ruxin-built gravity blockers aboard, along with all the research data.”

“What do they do?”

“Well...block gravity.”

“That’s impossible. Gravity’s a space-time warping effect. It’s not like EM. You can’t shield against it.”

Murdock shrugged, then remembered he was only on audio. “The blocker creates a zone of space-time resistant to warping, so to the layman it looks like the same thing.”

“Resistant—not proof?”

“About 99% resistant.”

“Pretty good. How much can it shield?”

“Not a planet, unfortunately. Basically, anything up to a superdreadnought in size. If we have enough time, we might scale them up, make bigger versions. The Ruxins are working on that, and on making more, and better.”

“Power consumption?”

“That’s the bad part. It will require more than most ships can generate. They’ll have to use capacitors to supplement, so they can probably only operate it for ten or fifteen minutes at a time. Since it’s a spherical effect, most of our ships are actually the wrong shape to take advantage of it efficiently.”

There was silence from Engels for a long moment. “Okay, Frank. I’ll clear Flight Deck Delta for you to land. We’ve had some problems with humanopt spies and saboteurs, so we’ll have to secure everything tight. We’ll be working around the clock from now on, getting ready for the Crystals to hit us.”

“How long until they get here?”

“Best guess? Five days.”

“Break out the stims. I’ll see you in half an hour.”

* * *

Once again, Carla Engels found herself aboard the captive Nest Ship, talking to Queen Gulnet. She visited about once a week, and comlinked more often than that, seeking the Opter’s viewpoint on various matters. Oddly, she always felt like Gulnet was being honest with her, and had to remind herself the insectoid was of a species at war with humanity.

“I greet you, Admiral Engels.”

“I greet you, Queen Gulnet.”

“What brings you aboard my luxury-liner today, Carla?”

Engels chuckled. “Your Earthan’s improving. Or your translator device is.”

“I have little to do except study my captors and think.” Gulnet folded her forelimbs. “Proceed.”

“Your Frankenstein’s monster is on the loose.”

Gulnet paused for a moment in apparent thought. Probably searching her capacious memory for the human reference. “The Azoics?”

“You Opters created them. I need your help to un-create them.”

“I’m listening.”

“They deployed a fleet of over five hundred cruisers. They jumped straight to New Earth, the Republic’s capital, and wrecked the planet. Nothing left alive bigger than bugs. Small bugs. They killed over fifty billion people, with no regard for civilian casualties.”

“The Azoics do not differentiate between civilians and military.”

“Just like you.”

“You mistake our method. We do not bombard noncombatant planetary populations. There were no noncombatants aboard *Indomitable*, no matter what their designation. It was a ship of war, and all aboard made war.”

Engels sighed. “We’ll never agree on this, but at least Opters have some compunctions, some rules. These Crystals have none. You might want to think about who you’re in bed with.”

“In bed with a Frankenstein’s monster... A peculiar but apt metaphor.”

“We’re pretty sure they’re headed here.”

“Here to Atlantis, yes. Your secondary capital. The Azoics are not hierarchical the way organic species are, but they understand the concept. However, they may overestimate the effect the destruction of governing planets will have on combat capacity. Most military industry is now in space. They would have to scour each system for thousands of orbital factories and habitats to really degrade your abilities.”

“You’re a smart girl for a bug, you know that?”

Gulnet bowed, with irony. “Smart enough to know you can’t evacuate the billions on Atlantis before they get here. Even if you did, that wouldn’t solve your Azoic problem. Yet, you must have a plan with some hope of success... or are we running away?”

Engels ignored the jibe. “The Ruxins have come up with a gravity blocker. We only have a few prototypes. It’s not perfect, but according to our calculations it should be proof against anything below a sixteen-ship beam, and will allow for some survivability against more powerful ones. One problem is, it generates a spherical field. Our warships are cylindrical. A blocking field big enough to cover the bow and stern and everything between takes ten times as much power as it would for a spherical ship.”

“Opter ships are spheroids... Ah! You wish to use this ship.”

“Bingo. The only question is, then what?”

“The gravity blocker may preserve this ship under fire, but how to destroy the Azoics, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have an answer?”

Engels paced. “Only one that might be implemented in time, but we need your help. We’ve developed a missile that should be about forty times as effective against the Crystals. Assuming a shield of the same strength as last time, thirty to sixty missiles might punch through it. How many missile launchers do you have aboard this Nest Ship?”

“Of shipkiller class? Roughly two hundred.”

“Reload capacity?”

“Six times that number in the ready carousels. Eight thousand more in magazines.”

Engels thought hard for a moment. “I doubt we’ll have more than a few hundred limpet missiles ready. We might load standards in the rest. Can your launchers take our missiles?”

“My workers can modify the launchers—if you allow them out of stasis.”

Engels pondered a moment, but knew already she had no choice but to risk it. “That’s where your help comes in. My crews can’t possibly modify your ship fast enough alone. I’ll have to risk trusting you. Start warming them up, on my authority.”

Gulnet gave orders to a trio of dog-bees while Engels gave new orders to the chief of the Hok contingent.

“What’s your power generation capacity?” Engels asked Gulnet.

Gulnet named a modest figure. Without large spinal weapons, Nest Ships used less power than Earthan dreadnoughts.

“We can triple that with auxiliary generators. It should be enough to keep up a continuous grav-blocker.”

Gulnet turned her attention to her strange, fractal displays and scent-projectors. “I see tugs are approaching.”

“We need to dock this ship with the fortress. I want her combat-ready in four days. It will be much faster to do the work straight from the maintenance bays.”

“I will bend every effort.”

Engels measured Gulnet with a long look. “I can’t coerce you more than I already have. I hope you’ve thought through all the arguments why you need to help us beat the Crystals—for the sake of your own species.”

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend. I understand.”

“I hope you do—because the converse is true.”

Gulnet cocked her triangular head. “Meaning?”

“The friend of an enemy is also an enemy. That’s how the Crystals will see it. With or without you, this Nest Ship is going into battle. What do you think the Crystals will do when they see Opters attacking them? They’ll infer their allies have betrayed them and joined us. Sooner or later, they’ll come for your planets, too.”

“A clever trick... I congratulate you.” Gulnet touched her explosive collars. “I am helpless. Even sabotaging my own ship would not stop you from using it in battle, creating the appearance of Opter betrayal of the Azoics. Thus, I must comply, with maximum efficiency.”

“Here’s another human saying for you. ‘If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em.’”

“How apt...”

* * *

Zaxby counted himself fortunate to be male right now. His hormone-driven joy in battle—or at least his unwillingness to miss one—had helped to tear him away from the fascinating research on Dulsul-1. So, although his research was far from complete, he arrived at Atlantis with files bulging with data on the Crystals. He hoped it would prove useful in defeating them.

As he sped inward from his transit, he confirmed he’d beaten *Richthofen* here, overtaking the slower ship in sidespace. That would give

him some time without Straker's inevitable meddling. Carla Engels would be much more amenable to Zaxby's expert advice on weapons development.

He found Murdock's yacht noted on the arrival logs. It was parked aboard the command fortress. He had mixed feelings about the human brainiac. Zaxby was honest enough to admit Murdock was almost as competent as he was, but it was quite annoying to have the man always second-guessing him.

Zaxby performed the Ruxin equivalent of a sigh. He would simply have to put up with Murdock for the good of the Republic. Defeating the Crystals must come before any personal considerations. He must be the bigger being.

When he entered the Acropolis Project's separate workspaces, which had taken over a large part of one end of the fortress, those who recognized him greeted him. Some even applauded or cheered. He took the adulation as his due.

Carla Engels waved him into her office. She looked harried and tired, her eyes bloodshot. "Zaxby! You didn't tell me you were coming."

"I have research data on the Crystals, from their homeworld." He handed her a data stick.

"Did you and Derek really wipe them out there?"

"We did."

Engels shuddered. "I know it had to be done, but genocide..."

"The Crystals we destroyed were all combatants. There are no Crystal children, no innocents. Each comes to life as a full adult, like a duplicated computer macro."

"An interesting moral argument. But at this point, if we destroy their fleet, we'll have made an entire sentient species go extinct."

"Yes, the remaining Crystal fleet constitutes the whole of their race. But they still have choices. They could run, for instance. If they come here and are destroyed, that's entirely on their own heads. Not that they have heads *per se*."

"That makes me feel a little better, but I still can't help feeling I was just on the other side of this argument with Gulnet."

"The captive Queen?"

"Yeah. She still thinks wiping out *Indomitable*'s crew to the last man was an ordinary act of war, not an atrocity."

“I doubt the argument will be resolved to your satisfaction.”

Engels rubbed her neck. “Guess you’re right. Any chance the Crystals will break off their attack? Go back to their homeworld?”

“From my researches and the data I was able to recover from their crystalline storage—fragments of their ‘memories,’ you might say—I believe not. I think they wouldn’t see the destruction of those on their homeworld as any different from losing cruisers in battle. Each Crystal is the same as any other, subject only to circumstance. Their homeworld is merely one more place to them, of little significance. They are not sentimental. That’s why they are not likely to head home.”

“So... they’ll try to kill us here.”

Zaxby waved two tentacles like arms, the subtentacles like hands. He found by using only two limbs when conversing, he put the humans more at ease. “They don’t think of it that way. They think of what they are doing not as killing, but as eliminating a source of opposition and annoyance, much as you might destroy a wasp’s nest or a warren of rats. As a race, they have only existed for a few decades. As a society, they haven’t developed the ability to empathize or understand other species.”

“Only a few decades?”

“Between forty and seventy years, I estimate.”

Engels poured herself some reconstituted juice, made a face at its flavor. “But their science is so advanced.”

“Their control of the forces of physics is innate, and allowed extreme progress along certain narrow lines, but in other ways, they are stunted.”

“Sounds like you almost feel sorry for them.”

“Only in the abstract. If they attack, they must be destroyed.”

“If? You think they might change their minds?”

Zaxby shrugged. “Probably not. If they did so, they could simply depart this region of the galaxy. We couldn’t stop them. That might be the best outcome for everyone.”

Engels sighed deeply. “That’s all above my pay grade anymore. Niedern’s running the show. It’s my job to make the tools to beat the Crystals.” She handed the data stick back to Zaxby. “Get to work. Coordinate with Murdock, Denovo and the senior engineers. Help them get the Nest Ship and the six superdreadnoughts with gravity blockers ready for combat.

“Gravity blockers?”

“They’ll explain it. I have to grab some shut-eye. I’ve been up all night.”

“Aye aye, Admiral Engels.”

Engels pointed a finger at Zaxby. “And remember, the good idea fairy is banned until after the battle. Understand?”

“Perfectly. I will not inject any improvements that cannot be incorporated immediately.”

Zaxby watched Carla with affection as she left for her nearby quarters, no doubt to suckle her offspring in her mammalian way. The tiny hatchling was so cute, Zaxby wanted to have one as a pet.

Pets would have to wait, however. It was time to get to work, time for his superior mind to save a world yet again.

How did humans ever get along without Ruxins?

When he found Murdock, he asked, “Is this room secure?”

“As secure as I can make it.”

“That will have to do.” Zaxby handed Murdock a case. “I brought you something.”

“What is it?”

“Open it. Carefully.”

Murdock did so. “Interesting...”

“Indeed. Let’s get to work.”

Chapter 34

Assault Carrier *Richthofen*, Atlantis System

Straker left fingermarks on the rail of the *Richthofen*'s holotank as it populated with Atlantis system information. He'd left Dulsul assured they would get here in time, but the days in sidespace had eroded his confidence. What if he was too late? What if Atlantis—and his family—were already ripped apart?

He told himself Carla and Katie—and Mara, don't forget Mara—would have been evacuated no matter what. It was an unworthy thought, but truth to be told, if it was choosing between twenty billion Atlanteans and his family, he'd take his family.

His hands relaxed. It appeared he'd arrived in time. The only ships in the system—thousands of ships—had Republic IFF tags. In fact, “thousands” might be an undercount. Tens of thousands, he was pretty sure, if every vessel were numbered. In addition to the flagship *Victory* and the ten thousand that had held the line at Gannon, every available ship was gathering here from throughout the Republic. More were arriving every minute.

Some of those thousands were warships, which were being sorted into sub-fleets and task forces by some system obscure to Straker's non-naval mind. Others were freighters, yachts, bulk cargo haulers, passenger liners, delivery couriers—every conceivable kind of vessel with sidespace capability. It reminded him of the evacuation at the beaches of Dunkirk, where hundreds of thousands of British and French soldiers had been snatched from the grasp of their enemies by swarms of civilian vessels.

Unfortunately, twenty billion people were simply too many to evacuate in the time available. Sinden had laid out the math for him. If ten thousand ships carried off one thousand passengers each, that was only ten million saved. If instead of leaving for sidespace they ferried ten million a day up to habitats and moons away from Atlantis, but still in-system, they might rescue as many as a billion. The downside being, more people rescued meant a more proximal and less secure sanctuary.

So, evacuation was no solution. It was only a field dressing on an impending fatal wound.

Straker spent the inbound time studying the military situation in as much detail as he could. When he came within FTL comlink range, though, he had only one thought: Carla and Katie. He spoke with Carla for an hour, a palliative for the piece of his soul that always seemed to be missing until he returned to her. In that conversation, he learned many things about the current situation.

But, as always, duty called in the form of several other comlink requests blinking on his desk. He said goodbye to Carla and took the first one, a vidlink.

“Liberator Straker!” Admiral Hayson Niedern said with forced joviality. “Welcome back, and congratulations for wiping out the entire population back on the Crystal home planet! No doubt you’re wondering about your next assignment.”

Carla had prepared Straker for Niedern and his truth-twisting ways. No doubt the man had phrased his “congratulations” deliberately to indict Straker in case a war crimes tribunal were ever convened. His wording strongly implied that guiltless beings may have been killed, and he was probably recording the conversation as evidence. Straker had to push back against any such underhanded accusations. Then he could deal with Niedern’s other implication.

Straker put on a thin smile. “Admiral Niedern... Yes, we conquered Dulsul-1 and dispersed all the Crystal energy there. My brainiacs assure me there’s no such thing as an innocent Crystal child, or even a civilian. They reproduce by dividing into new adults, and every one of their race is a combatant. Surely your briefing team has advised you accordingly.”

Niedern’s face froze for a tiny moment, and then relaxed affably. “Of course, of course, and I’m ecstatic! We all are. Good thing your stopover didn’t bring you here late to the party, though.”

“As my message said, I was hoping to divert the Crystal fleet into trying to protect its homeworld. Plan B was to destroy the threat from Dulsul-1. That’s what my people did.”

“Yes, and I heard we almost lost you! And that Ruxin fellow had to override your suit because you were suicidal...?”

What a clever weasel, Straker thought. This kind of rhetoric was Niedern’s home turf. “Not suicidal, simply willing to risk my life to complete my mission.”

“Well, whatever you call it, it was well done. Not to mention lucky, as usual.” Niedern sighed as if it were all so tiresome, and picked up a hardcopy. “Moving on. I have here yours and the *Richthofen*’s assignment in the fleet formation. You’ll be—”

“No.”

“—on the—what?”

“I said no. You don’t give me orders, Admiral.”

“I beg to differ. The duly elected government of the Republic confirmed my appointment as Fleet Admiral. The ship you’re on is a Fleet asset. I suppose you could argue that you personally, as a mechsuitter, are a Ground Forces asset, but—”

“Tell me, Hayson, am I a fucking idiot?”

Niedern paused, apparently nonplussed by the vulgarity. “I—no, of course not—”

“Then what makes you think I’m not still supreme commander of all military forces in the Republic?”

“Well... the law, I suppose. You overthrew the Mutuality and the Hundred Worlds, but then you placed the new united civilian government back in charge. They made me Admiral of the Fleet. It all seems pretty clear.”

“Except for one thing. The Constitution of the Republic.”

“We don’t have a ratified constitution yet. They’re still working on it, I hear.”

“Precisely. Which means there’s *no* constitution to constrain me. What I did, I can undo—and will, if I have to. We’re still at war, and at the end of the day, I’ll say who’s in charge.”

Niedern paled, then blustered. “That’s the act of a tyrant!”

“Every military commander is a tyrant during a war. What matters is that the tyrant steps aside when peace comes. I’ll do that. For now, I’m the boss.”

“The regulations are clear. You can’t just usurp the chain of command at will. I’ll have you arrested!”

Straker grinned. “You can try. Are you sure you can make that stick?”

“I’ll make it stick. The Fleet will follow my orders.”

“Let’s find out, shall we?” Straker opened another of the waiting comlinks, creating a conference call. “Hello, Vic.”

“Greetings, Liberator.” Vic’s holo-avatar appeared on a split-screen.

“Any chance you’ve been listening in to my conversation with Admiral Niedern?”

“I’m not authorized to do so.”

“I’m giving you permission to review it.”

“Admiral Niedern?” Vic asked.

Niedern waved his permission. “Of course. Vic is a loyal officer, and I trust his analysis of any situation.”

“I’ve reviewed the conversation,” Vic said with no perceptible pause.

“Well?” Straker asked. “Who’s right?”

“Legally? On balance, in my opinion Admiral Niedern has the letter of the law on his side.”

“Ah-ha!” Niedern said.

“But there are two mitigating factors,” Vic continued. “One, Liberator Straker has already established himself as de facto supreme commander of the Republic military. He installed the current government and dictated its forms. For the last year, all branches of government have acted as if Straker was, in fact, the supreme commander. The fact that none raised objection is evidence in his favor. A tribunal might rule for him.”

“And number two?” Straker asked.

Vic gave Niedern an apologetic glance. “The Republic military will split if forced to choose between you two. In my estimation, approximately sixty percent will side with the Liberator. That would be disastrous.”

Niedern licked his lips. “So, you’re saying I’m right, but Straker can make trouble.”

Vic held up a hand. “I wouldn’t characterize it that way, sir. Rather, I’m suggesting the matter is not settled—and with the government relocated to New Siberia, we can’t obtain an official ruling or opinion on the matter. You two must find an accommodation until that happens, or we’ll have a civil war.”

Straker stared at Niedern, who stared back. The man was a weasel, but he didn’t lack spine. And, his comlink originated from aboard Victory. Straker doubted Vic would allow him to bring a ground force onto the flagship to deal forcefully with Niedern.

They were standing on a knife-edge between the law and lawlessness. Now was not the time for a power struggle—not in the face of a dangerous enemy.

So, though he hated to back down, Straker smoothed his face. “I’ll tell you what. I won’t dispute your command of Fleet ops. I’ll keep explicit command of *Richthofen* and any other ground assets—mechsuiters, battlesuiters, marines, everything. You keep doing what you’re doing, and I’ll do what I do best.”

“Which is?”

“Find an unexpected way to win.”

“And after?”

Straker shrugged. “I pledged to step down as supreme commander when the Republic is at peace. You can move on to your senatorial ambitions or whatever it is that you’re angling for.”

Niedern licked his lips. “For the good of the Republic, and under protest, I agree.”

“Fine. Straker out.” He closed the comlink with Niedern, but kept the one for Vic open. “Vic.”

“Yes, Liberator?”

“You’re the unspoken factor in this deal. You’re more than just some ship captain. Your body is the flagship Niedern commands from. Will you enforce the deal?”

“Will I keep Niedern focused on defeating the enemy instead of politics and career, you mean?”

“In a nutshell.”

“If I can. I’ll try to give you as much leeway as you require when the time comes.”

Straker raised his eyebrows. “When what time comes?”

“When the time comes to do what you do best. We need to win this one, Admiral Straker—at any cost.”

“Agreed. Straker out.”

A new, urgent comlink request popped into his queue. Admiral Ellen Gray, just arrived in flatspace. He keyed up the FTL comlink, barely within range. “Straker here.”

“Ellen Gray, Liberator. I need to talk to you privately.”

“This FTL comlink is secure.”

“I’m not so confident... Can you rendezvous with my task force?”

“I’ll make it happen. Straker out.”

Two hours later, Straker shuttled over to Admiral Gray’s flagship, the superdreadnought *Lothringen*, as she cruised alongside the *Richthofen*. He

was piped aboard with full ceremony, a good sign as far as Straker was concerned.

A grim-faced Gray ushered Straker into her flag office and poured bourbon. “Blood and thunder,” she toasted with a clink of glasses. “*Into the mouth of hell rode the six hundred...*”

Straker lifted his highball to look her in the eye. “So, you’re optimistic.”

“Oh, *sure*. We’ve got double the force we had at Gannon. The Crystals have sixty times as much. Those are *wonderful* odds.” She drank.

Straker tossed back his shot and poured another. “We have upgrades. Overloaded weapons. Limpet missiles. Gravity-blockers.”

“Yes. Those probably reduce the odds to ten-to-one. Maybe even as good as five-to-one... against us.”

“You didn’t call me here just to tell me we’re screwed, did you?”

“No. I called you here for this.” She handed Straker a page of hardcopy.

“Authorization for Engels to take back her position as Fleet Admiral at any time. Great, we can get rid of Niedern. Why show it to me? And why all the secrecy?”

“Politics. I hate this stuff, you hate it, but it’s a fact of life.”

“What politics? This solves our problem.”

Gray shook her head. “Niedern is a hero to many. It’s all over the nets. The newsies love him—or they’re being paid to love him. Remove him, and we get unhappy civvies, unhappy spacers and troops—which means we lose combat efficiency. Also, what happens when suddenly Engels leaves the Acropolis Project?”

Straker put his glass down and rotated it idly. “I see what you mean. Disruption in the Fleet, disruption in weapons development. We can’t afford that.”

“I’m glad you agree. I’m concerned Engels would implement this immediately upon receiving it. That’s why I brought it to you first.”

“You don’t have much confidence in Carla.”

“I do—but this is too important to take chances. If I were Carla, I’d be tempted to shove this down Niedern’s throat and damn the consequences. I figured if you saw the dangers, you could help her think it through and make the right choice—even if it means letting Niedern off the hook for now.”

Straker paced, breathing deeply and thinking. “If he does win the battle, he’ll be that much harder to dislodge.”

“Why? This order is explicit.”

“As long as Niedern stays aboard *Victory* and Vic is protecting him, I can’t reach him to actually enforce this.”

Gray’s eyes narrowed. “You think Vic will defy a ministerial order?”

“I don’t know. It depends on how he sees the situation. What if he thinks this order is a threat to the existence of the Republic?”

“He’s a loyal officer. He’ll follow orders.”

“I was a loyal officer once... Now, I put doing what’s right ahead of orders. Maybe he will too. We have no idea how his mind really works.”

“Even if he does defy the order, what can Vic do about it—other than protect Niedern from arrest? The rest of the fleet will obey.”

Straker gestured broadly to emphasize his points. “Vic controls the single most advanced ship in our fleet. He’s an AI, the only one in existence, and he has every military code and no doubt every hack ever developed. Trinity once told me he had a core of deep darkness to his soul—that’s what she said—and that without her, she thought he’d give in to it. Remember, every other AI humanity’s ever produced has gone insane. He could make a lot of trouble. Best not to force a showdown yet.”

“Gods and monsters.” Gray poured herself another two fingers of bourbon and tossed it off. “Maybe we deserve damnation, the way we keep turning on each other.”

“Everybody deserves damnation. Good thing we don’t usually get what we deserve.” Straker tucked the order into his tunic. “I’ll take this copy and deliver it to Carla in person, so you don’t have to.”

Gray pursed her lips. “This may be taking too much leeway, but I’ll consider the order delivered. If *you* don’t tell her about it until the time is right...”

“That’s on me.” Straker held out his hand to shake. “Thank you, Ellen. You’re one of the good guys.”

Gray took his right hand in hers and covered the clasp with her left. “Liberator... Derek. The law is an ass. Don’t ever forget that. One thing DeChang always told me: use the law; don’t let it use you.”

“Sounds more like Abraham Lincoln than Emilio DeChang.”

She shrugged and let go of his hand. “Truth is truth, wherever you find it. Good luck and good hunting, Liberator.”

“You too, Ellen. See you on the other side.”

* * *

Straker directed *Richthofen* to rendezvous with the captive Nest Ship, designated *Gulnet* by the label that drifted near its outline in the holotank. Carla was aboard supervising the ship's battle modifications, and he refused to delay seeing her one more minute.

She shuttled over from *Gulnet*. When she set foot on the *Richthofen*'s primary flight deck, Straker was waiting for her. She threw herself into his arms and their mouths fused for a long minute.

A stage-cough from behind made Straker turn. A long rank of personnel had formed, with Loco in first position. Heiser, Gurung, Adler, Smits, Sinden and many others spontaneously erupted in applause, whether for the kiss or for Carla's arrival, Straker didn't know.

As soon as Straker released Carla, Loco whooped and picked her up, whirled her around and kissed her cheeks enthusiastically. "Mmm, you're curvier now, Carly. Give me some sugar!"

"Put me down, you clown." When he did, she hugged every single one of the audience in turn. "It's great to see you all." She ran her eyes over the group. "I'm sorry about Redwolf, and Trinity. And Dexon, and.... Gods, so many."

The men and women there sobered. "There'll be more," Straker said. "But fewer if we all bust ass, starting right now. Admiral Engels, we're at your disposal for work on the *Gulnet*, or anything else you need."

"I can use every skilled hand, with thanks," she replied.

Straker nodded at Gurung. "Take charge, Chief. Get your people moving, and anyone you want to requisition. Surge protocol, stims authorized for everyone."

Gurung saluted sharply and trotted off. The rest of the people dispersed except for Loco, who accompanied Engels and Straker back onto her shuttle.

As the pilot steered the shuttle out into space, Straker said, "What's this with the Nest Ship? Shouldn't you be concentrating on our own ships?"

"Trust me, Derek, I have a plan."

"Okay, tell me."

She ticked off items on her fingers. "The *Gulnet* might be viewed as friendly to the Crystals, so I'm hoping she can get in close and spring a

surprise on them. When we do, that betrayal should drive a political wedge between them and the Opters.”

“Good thinking.”

“Also, she’s spherical, which makes Murdock’s gravity blocker eight to ten times as efficient for the same power. She has no spinal weapon, so there’s no need to divert power to offense. She’s launcher-heavy, which works well with the limpet missiles. She still has over three thousand drones, which will provide distraction if nothing else.”

“This gravity-blocker... I know it should provide protection against grav-beams, but how will it interact with a Crystal shield?”

“Murdock and Zaxby disagree. Given similar power levels, Murdock thinks the fields will cancel out if they touch. Zaxby thinks they’ll interact violently.”

“Too bad we don’t have enough blockers to install on some suicide ships and find out,” Loco said.

“Yeah, too bad,” Engels said.

Straker’s eyes lit up. Engels pointed her finger at him. “You’re thinking something crazy.”

“Crazy like a fox. Or loco like this guy Loco, here.”

“Huh?” Loco said.

Straker slapped Loco’s shoulder. “You gave me an idea. Fire-ships.”

“Fire-ships?”

“Old Earth wet-navy tactic. Load up old ships with flammables and ram the enemy. The skeleton crew would jump ship at the last minute. Those blocker-equipped SDNs need to be able to suicide against Crystals. Drive right through their shields.”

“But we don’t know what will happen,” Engels said.

“We’ll find out with the first one. If it fails, well... thousands of ships will probably die in this battle. One more won’t matter.”

Engels seemed appalled. “You can’t ask their crews to suicide!”

“I can and I will, if I have to. It’s for all the marbles, the fate of the Republic and maybe all of humanity. I’m willing to give my life. They should be too. But!” Straker held up a hand. “We can give them a fighting chance to live. Skeleton crews and escape pods. FTL datalink assistance from ships behind them. If the first fire-ship turns out badly, we’ll use the others as you say, as blockers. But what if it works? What if it takes down

their shields, even for ten seconds? We'll immediately hit their naked cruisers with thousands of beams."

Engels rubbed her temples. "It could work... or it could be an utter waste. Damn. I told my people the good idea fairy was banned, and now here you come with a good idea."

"How hard will it be to implement?" Loco asked.

"Hmm. Not too hard, actually." Straker and Loco gazed at Engels until she nodded once, sharply. "Okay. I'll order it."

"Good."

The shuttle landed on one of the Nest Ship's flight decks and the trio disembarked. "I have to get back to work," Engels said. "Why are you guys here anyway?"

Straker looked up, down and all around at the bustle of activity inside the *Gulnet*, insectoids mixing indiscriminately with humans and Ruxins as they worked. He grinned. "I got another good idea."

"Cosmos, no!"

"No worries. This one's all mine. Carry on, Admiral Engels."

Engels kissed him once more and mock-glared. "I hate you, Derek Straker."

"And I hate you, too."

"But I love you!" Loco said, reaching his arms as if to hug Engels again.

She stiff-armed him, and then put her finger in his face, still smiling. "Troublemaker."

"Always."

Engels shook her head ruefully and jogged off.

Loco turned to Straker. "I know that look, boss. You sicced the good idea fairy on Carla partly so you could pull some shit of your own."

"You know me too well." Straker stuck his comlink in his ear. "Colonel Adler, you there?"

"Here, sir."

"Find Heiser and join me on the *Gulnet*, will you? We have work to do."

"Right away, sir."

Chapter 35

Atlantis System, Nest Ship *Gulnet*.

The first Crystal signatures showed up at the edge of the Atlantis system twenty-nine hours later. They weren't trying to hide, for they immediately began destroying probes, drones and scout ships. Those scouts immediately ran, but kept the Crystals under surveillance. The very density of spy platforms allowed reasonable fixes on every Crystal cruiser.

Aboard the Nest Ship *Gulnet*, Straker and his staff occupied a conference room prepared for them. They watched intently as Commander Sinden manipulated the add-on human-style holotank to show the situation. Even though they couldn't affect the outcome of these initial engagements, none there could tear themselves away.

Engels had briefed Vic on her ideas about how to use the grav-blocker-ships, and Vic concurred. Vic in turn nudged Niedern into forming six special task forces, each anchored by one of the blocker-equipped SDNs. These task forces were deployed outward from the star, ready to engage the Crystals as soon as they showed.

Each task force was composed of about two thousand ships with overload modifications, and carried a limited number of limpet missiles. Most of the limpet missiles were reserved for the main force, nearer Atlantis.

As it happened, Task Force Two was closest to the transiting Crystals. TF2 maneuvered to attack at flank speed. TF1 and TF3 did the same, though they'd be an hour or more behind.

"Five... six... seven..." Loco counted as Crystals showed up, scattered over a large region of flatspace. "How many will TF2 try to take on before it's too many?"

"Carla thinks eight is the max," Straker said from beside him. "Don't worry yet, though. They have to assemble. The goal is to catch one or two and try out our tactics."

"Try out the fire-ship, you mean."

Straker shrugged. "The fire-ship, the overloads, the missiles. We need data. These task forces will get some."

As TF2 approached, the first Crystals to arrive formed an eight-ship. There were four other stragglers that raced to join that group. The first two

made it.

TF2 caught the third, and engaged.

Thousands of beams lanced out at long range while a salvo of twelve hundred shipkillers streaked toward the lone Crystal. Thirty of these were limpet missiles, disguised among identical-looking weapons.

The two thousand Republic ships of TF2, ranging from SDNs down to cutters, hustled behind the missiles. The enemy cruiser first picked off forty or fifty shipkillers with quick, precise grav-beams, and then shifted to striking attacking ships as they approached. All the while, that cruiser fled toward its fellow Crystals while those fellows raced to join it.

“Nineteen... twenty...” Loco chanted as each contact popped out of sidespace. “Ooh, look at that!”

The twenty-first contact appeared directly in front of TF2. It immediately engaged its shield as TF2 ships began delightedly shifting fire onto this new target at point-blank range.

The missiles were already beyond this new target, but all it took was some in-place turning of entire ships to point the overloaded weapons at the Crystal. “Come on, coordinate,” Straker muttered.

The TF2 commander was on the ball. The fire from his task force slackened for a moment, and then lashed out all at once. The enemy cruiser was pincushioned with thousands of beams and railguns, many of them triple-effective overloaded spinal weapons. TF2 couldn’t have asked for a better setup.

The nexus of fire blossomed into screeching white noise as EM radiation flooded the area. Several ships had been directly in the path and couldn’t turn aside in time. Some were destroyed. Others limped through with damage.

“It’s gone,” Loco said, pumping his fist. “Hell, yeah!”

Heiser clapped his big hands together. “See, they ain’t invincible!” Others cheered or murmured in satisfied tones.

“No, but they’re tough,” Straker said. “We won’t get many two-thousand-to-one freebies like that.”

“Only 511 more to go,” Colonel Adler said flatly. That sobered the onlookers.

“Missiles,” Loco said, pointing at the holotank. The missile salvo had almost reached the fleeing Crystal single. “They’ll catch it.”

TF2 shifted fire again to that target for a few seconds, and then shut down its direct fire. “They won’t risk hitting missiles as they go terminal,” Commander Sinden said. “Also, we need a clear record of first limpet strike, for analysis.” She zoomed the view repeatedly, closer and closer to the Crystal target.

The Crystal stabbed out as fast as it could, knocking down shipkillers with its grav-beams, but it could only strike so many. Each grav-beam was far overpowered for this kind of work.

“Bet they wish they had Opter drones now,” Loco said.

“It does seem an error for the Crystals to leave their allies behind,” Sinden said.

“Heart attack!” Loco clutched his chest. “Sinden actually agreed with me!”

Sinden ignored Loco. “We’ve only lost one limpet missile. They’re going terminal.”

The missiles caught up with the Crystal in a cloud, surrounded the cruiser, and then turned to dive inward.

“If these were all shipkillers,” Sinden continued, “they’d detonate by proximity and many would be lost in nuclear fratricide. Most of the energy would be wasted, aimed in the wrong direction. This salvo, however, is different.” She touched a control and the display slowed to a crawl.

“Hey!” Loco said. “I want to see what happens.”

“Whatever happened has already happened, General Paloco, due to lightspeed lag. Allow me to show you in detail.”

Most of the missiles on the display brightened, and then disappeared. “Those were the decoys,” Sinden said. “They have no warheads. They were just there to get the limpet missiles in. These twenty-nine.” Those blinked.

Sinden advanced the record on slow until the speeding limpet missiles converged on the target. “You will notice they are highly coordinated. Their SAI network is doing its utmost to bring them in at precisely the same time. They are doing this amidst the thousand decoys, not shown.”

“Got it,” Straker said. “Keep going.”

Sinden rolled the record forward. The twenty-nine missiles suddenly flipped and decelerated, coming to rest almost touching the Crystal shield. “This is the point of greatest risk. If the Crystal cruiser were to suddenly expand its shield, all these missiles would be destroyed by kinetic collision. However, normally the Crystals do the opposite—they squeeze down and

thicken their shield to maximum. That has already happened, so now it's only a question of enough energy being applied to break it."

The limpet warheads spun, thrustered to aim, and then exploded in unison. The display fuzzed. Then it cleared, empty.

Another cheer rocked the display room. "One more down," Straker said.

"Twenty-nine limpets appear to be enough to kill a single cruiser," Sinden said. "That's important data. However, the enemy might know this too. They may develop immediate countertactics—if they can determine what happened."

"Nothing's sure in war," Straker said. "Show us what happens next, Commander. Catch us up to current time."

Sinden rolled the record forward. TF2 bored in toward the enemy group, now composed of sixteen, which had formed into one unit under a single shield. TF2 bombarded it with direct fire with no apparent effect.

As the range closed, the enemy picked off ships—first escort vessels, and then cruisers. In response, TF2 reorganized itself to put the blocker-equipped SDN in the lead. It had a volunteer skeleton crew and most of its functions were controlled by other SDNs behind it via FTL datalink.

The Crystal group struck the blocker-SDN repeatedly, first with smaller grav-beams, and then with what looked like a full sixteen-power super-beam. The ship sailed through unscathed, prompting more celebration from Straker's staff.

Straker didn't cheer, though. He kept watching the holotank. "Is it all caught up?" he asked Sinden.

"Yes, sir. This is feed as we receive it."

After four distinct attempts to destroy the blocker-SDN, the Crystals shifted their fire to other targets and began methodically to rip them apart. No Republic vessel, not even an SDN, could resist the bigger grav-beams. The capital ships lined up behind the blocker-ship, but this was like a thousand men all trying to hide behind one tree. They simply couldn't.

The blocker-SDN bored ahead inexorably, maneuvering to meet the slower Crystal sixteen-ship. The Crystals didn't try to evade. They probably couldn't, not with each ship dragging the mass of a synthetic black hole around. They did, however, wipe out over one hundred ships, most of them of capital class.

"What a bloodbath! Why are we still attacking?" Heiser asked. "I'm just a dumb grunt, but why not just send in the blocker-ship and the other guys

could run away? They're dying for nothing!"

"Sergeant Major," Sinden replied, "you're no dumber than the average ground soldier. I will explain. The other ships are closing the range in hopes that the blocker-ship will neutralize the Crystal shield, if only for a moment. If that happens, they must be ready to fire. That means a certain number of them will be destroyed."

"Okay. I get it," Heiser said. "Like charging a machinegun nest. Somebody's gonna die to get it."

"If it makes you feel any better, crew size on those ships has been minimized and they're all volunteers."

Heiser's brow furrowed. "I dunno. Does that make *you* feel any better?"

Sinden turned away. "Feelings are irrelevant. All that matters is winning this battle."

"Look," Loco said. He pointed.

The blocker-SDN approached its target. Suddenly, the Crystal shield swelled like a balloon. It appeared the Crystals were doing what they'd done at Celadon—using their shield like a club to smash their enemies bodily from space.

The shield intersected with the blocker-SDN and passed over it—with no collision. The SDN disappeared.

The rest of TF2 fired everything. The enemy shield immediately contracted to thicken, and the blocker-SDN reappeared, cruising serenely onward.

"It survived," Loco exclaimed, startled. "Went right through the shield and out the other side."

Straker gripped the holotank rails. "Sinden, pass to Vic—get that blocker-SDN back ASAP. We need to know what happened to it as it went through the shield!"

Sinden squared her shoulders. "Admiral, we're twenty-four light-minutes away from the engagement. This all happened twenty-four minutes ago. TF2 is outside of FTL comlink range, so any message to them will take a further twenty-four minutes. And finally, I have no doubt Admiral Engels and her team will already be demanding the same data. But I'll send the message if you wish."

"You're right. Don't bother." Straker slammed his fist into his palm. "I hate space warfare! I hate it. It's agony in slow motion."

Colonel Adler cleared his throat. “I think we’ll get into action soon enough, sir. Permission to see to my troops?”

“Granted.”

Adler departed. Loco chuckled. “He couldn’t stand it either... and neither can I. I think I’ll go make a sweep through Breaker territory. You know, press the flesh.”

Straker let that double-entendre pass. “Go on.”

Loco left to show his face among the Breakers. They and the Regiment were packed aboard the Nest Ship, along with their landers and Marksmen, over Engels’ objections. They’d left the armored vehicles behind, but kept everything else.

Engels was back at the Acropolis Project on the fortress. She thought she was staying at her post, but Straker had made sure Murdock would get her and Katie out on the *Brainiac* if the Crystals broke through to destroy Atlantis.

The miners had requested to come along on the *Gulnet*, but Straker refused. He offered to drop them on a mining hab, but all of them demanded to be part of the fight, so he let them stay aboard the *Richthofen*, in the rear. He shook his head. Idiots. Brave, patriotic idiots. He was proud of them. They’d stepped up and fought like real soldiers.

It might not matter in the end. Thousands of the brave had already died, and they’d only destroyed two Crystals.

Straker turned his attention back to the holotank, where TF2 had flown past the Crystal squadron-group. That was growing as more cruisers joined it, forming the nucleus of a world-killer fleet.

TF2 circled widely, spreading out and hoping to snap up another straggler if it appeared near them. TF1 and TF3 did the same, staying away from the ever-growing main Crystal group. It appeared that group was content to keep the Republic ships at bay, covering their fellows as they arrived. The Republic ships turned gradually, out and around on course to eventually join the main fleet. TF2’s blocker-SDN had turned tightly, ignoring the Crystals, and headed inward at flank speed, alone.

The blockers created a standoff, it seemed. Neither blocker nor Crystal could hurt each other—at least, not until the Crystals combined their power. Maybe a super-beam could overwhelm a blocker, but at the moment, at least the Republic had eight ships that were proof against the enemy’s only weapons.

As he watched, Straker's seed of a plan blossomed. The blocker-shield interaction was the key, he knew in his gut. The brainiacs thought the collision would either take down the shield or result in an explosion, but it had done neither. The blocker simply allowed the ship to pass through the shield.

And once the blocker-SDN was inside the shield, the Crystal cruiser still hadn't been able to destroy it. It had sailed out the other side and survived. On the other hand, something had stopped the SDN from destroying the Crystal as well. The SDN should have been able to tear the Crystal up at point-blank range.

He needed info.

"I need an FTL comlink to that blocker-SDN. What's her name?"

"*Borodino*," Sinden said. "I'll try to establish one. We're out of range, but we might be able to relay through closer ships. I can also send a radio message."

"Do it. I need to know what happened inside that Crystal shield."

"Understood." Sinden went to work.

In the holotank, the battle shaped up slowly. The Crystal main fleet was strong enough now to keep the task forces at bay while they assembled their stragglers. When enough arrived, they split into 32-ship squadrons—enough to take on any conceivable enemy except the whole fleet itself.

Maybe even that. It was shaping up to be a clash of titans, and the Republic's titan was smaller. How do you attack a fleet that can join itself together at will to outwit any maneuver? Once joined, the enemy fleet had no flanks and no vulnerabilities.

Brute force couldn't be the only answer. Somehow, Straker had to find an edge.

"Get me a comlink to Engels," he said.

"FTL comlink established."

"I'm here, Derek," Engels' voice came on the audio.

"You're watching the battle?"

"Of course."

"Anything you'd do different from Niedern?"

"Not really. I get the feeling Vic's doing more than Niedern is. Our formations and maneuvers are so precise and well timed—looks like AI perfection to me."

"That's good, right?"

“Far as it goes. What’s on your mind?”

Straker fingered the hardcopy inside his tunic. “I can’t help but think we’re fighting this battle with no imagination. That if you were in charge, you’d be doing better. Would you? Is there something they’ve missed?”

“Why are you asking me this? They don’t want input from me.”

Straker almost told her about the order, but held back. “I could relay your insights. The most important ones, anyway. Directly to Vic if Niedern won’t listen.”

Engels was silent for a long moment. “I think it’s too late, but if I’d been in charge, I’d have sent the entire grand fleet immediately to the Crystal transit area. We’d have caught them with maybe two hundred assembled. If we could break that number, we could spread out and catch the rest as they arrived.”

“Wouldn’t they just jump away if you hit them in flatspace?”

“That would be a win for us anyway, to buy time and save Atlantis for now.”

“One big roll of the dice, eh? I like it. Why didn’t Vic think of that?”

“Just because he’s a smart AI doesn’t mean he thinks of everything. I’d say he’s attacking the situation like an engineering problem—how to coordinate all forces, achieve the perfect attack,” Engels said. “He lacks imagination.”

“What if you could take charge right now? Could we still do it your way?”

“It’s too late. Better that we let the Crystals come into curved space. Force the decision at a time and place of our choosing, and hope Vic can set up the perfect set-piece battle. That’s his one big roll of the dice.”

“And we have no more rolls.”

“Except yours. Your shoot-the-moon ground attack plan.”

Straker coughed. “You weren’t supposed to know about that.”

“Oh, come *on*. You move your troops aboard *Gulnet*, the ship with the highest-power grav-blocker, the only one under your direct orders because it’s not part of the regular fleet. Obviously you’re thinking of trying some insane knife-fight tactic.”

“Then why didn’t you object?”

Straker heard Engels sigh. He wished he could see her face, but a non-FTL vidcom would have meant minutes between sending and receiving transmissions.

“Because I knew you wouldn’t listen, and because...because unlike some things you’ve done, Atlantis—twenty billion people—really is worth an insane risk,” Engels said. “And you’ll only try it your way after Niedern and Vic try it theirs. Right?”

“Right.”

“Promise me.”

“I swear to the Cosmos, I’ll give Vic his shot first. Happy?”

“Oh, ecstatic. We’re talking about Katie losing her father.”

Straker’s heart skipped a beat. “Yeah. I don’t have any answers for that.” He took out the hardcopy order once more, looked at it, and put it back in his tunic.

“Is that all? I need to get back to work,” Engels said.

“Why do you think the *Borodino* didn’t destroy the Crystal when she was inside their shield? She had two seconds or so—plenty of time for SAIs to auto-engage. Even if her spinal weapon didn’t bear, an SDN has hundreds of point-defense beams and, what, twelve big secondaries?”

“Sixteen,” Engels said. “I agree. They should’ve torn that Crystal apart. Murdock thinks the shield somehow prevented it.”

“What does Zaxby think?”

“He’s off in the *Darter* somewhere. We have no idea what goes on inside a closed shield. Maybe it interferes with power, electronics, physics...maybe there’s an inner shield that guards the cruiser itself. We’re waiting on the report from the *Borodino*, but she’s still too far out.”

“I need that info, Carla.”

“Of course. For your crazy ground attack.”

“I need to know what we’ll be up against—if we have any chance at all.”

“As soon as I know, you will too. Engels out.”

The room’s door opened. An unarmed Opter worker stepped in, a Hok guard at its back. “The one called Liberator is summoned to the Queen,” it said through its translator.

Chapter 36

Atlantis System, Nest Ship *Gulnet*

At the Opter's declaration that Queen Gulnet wanted to see him, Straker exchanged amused looks with his staff. "I'm *summoned*. Guess I should go see what Her Majesty wants."

Gulnet's command chamber—might as well call it a bridge—now combined elements of Opter and Republic control centers, along with a bewildering assortment of insectoids, humans, Ruxins and Hok. The busy personnel parted for Straker's Hok escort.

He strode up to the Queen. "What?"

"I greet you, Liberator Straker."

"I'm busy. Can we please dispense with the formalities?"

"You are a rude species," Gulnet said. "We shall not join battle for many hours. Courtesy costs nothing."

"Fine. I greet you, Queen Gulnet. What do you want?"

"As Admiral Engels is not aboard, I desire to speak with a person of appropriate rank. Subordinates have their place, but their conversation is sparse and tiresome."

"Maybe if you didn't treat them all like slaves, they'd have more interesting things to say."

"I didn't summon you for a critique of our social structure."

Straker stiffened. "You didn't summon me at all. I came by choice. And I'm now leaving by choice. Oh, and those collars look good on you." He addressed the Hok officer nearby. "Major 24, watch her closely for any treachery."

"Wait," Gulnet said. "Perhaps 'summon' is the wrong word. Is 'invite' better? I apologize for the poor translation."

The Earthan coming out of Gulnet's translator was so perfect, Straker didn't buy the excuse, but he let her save face. "Apology accepted. Keep talking, if you have something to say."

Gulnet gestured toward the holotank. "This ship has been ordered forward. We will rendezvous with the grand fleet in eight hours. The rendezvous point places Republic forces in open space, at a place to intercept the Crystal advance upon Atlantis."

"Yeah, so?"

“If our predictive simulations are accurate, the Crystals will engage and destroy the grand fleet five hours after that.”`

“*And destroy?*”

“The simulations seem clear.”

“You’re trying to say we have no chance?”

“Current calculations indicate less than ten percent.”

Straker cracked his knuckles and started pacing. “Why are you telling me this?”

“You seem to have some influence over military operations. Perhaps you can alter the outcome.”

“By doing what?”

“It’s pointless to fight, knowing we will lose. Better to retreat the grand fleet and all who can be evacuated. Fight another day, under better circumstances. Continue to research technical improvements. Buy time.”

“And lose twenty billion people?”

“Only nineteen billion, seven hundred forty million.”

“Only! No, we can’t do that.”

Gulnet’s antennae curled and shook, as if expressing some unknown emotion. Amazement? Incredulity? Amusement? “And you call *me* immoral! You would condemn your entire Republic trying to save one planet.”

Straker strode up and seized one of Gulnet’s forelimbs. “We don’t think the way you do, discarding people like playing pieces. We fight for every inch of ground.”

Gulnet twisted her forelimb, surprised that she couldn’t pull it loose. “Unhand me, rude human!”

Straker squeezed, feeling exoskeleton flex to the cracking point.

“Thanks for the analysis, but we’re going into battle. I suggest you direct your forces as effectively as possible, because the only way you survive is if we win.”

“That’s why I called you here, Liberator. I know you have a fallback plan, using your ground troops. Now that the blocker-SDN has shown its ability to penetrate the Crystal shield, your plan becomes viable. I wish to improve your odds.”

Straker let go of her limb, which she quickly withdrew out of his reach.

“I’m listening,” he said after a moment’s hesitation.

“I have over one thousand extra wasps in stasis aboard this ship, along with their battlesuits. They can supplement your attack.”

“Or sabotage it. You really think I’m giving your wasps battlesuits?”

“My pilot-wasps already wait within my drones, stacked in this ship’s launch tubes. What’s a few more with battlesuits? I know you don’t trust me, but I am under coercion. For the sake of myself and my species, I must comply effectively. I have explosive collars on and my Nest Ship sails in a sea of enemies. I am no fool. I wish to live. I wish to return to the Hive. I would see peace with the Republic. The Azoics cannot be trusted. For all these reasons, you must let me help.”

Straker stared long and hard at Gulnet, as if he could somehow perceive whether or not he could trust her. In the end, he had no evidence either way... but his gut told him he had no choice. He needed every edge.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll authorize your battlesuiters—but they’ll take orders from me.”

“Agreed.”

“How long do you need for them to wake up and be ready to fight?”

“Fifty-five minutes.”

“Fine. Major 24, Gulnet is authorized to wake up all excess wasps, and access their equipment, one hour prior to engagement with the enemy.”

“Aye aye, sir!” Major 24 replied, saluting.

“Oh, and Major?”

“Sir!”

Straker handed him the hardcopy order. “Make a secure certified holo-copy of this and return it to me ASAP. If I’m confirmed KIA, transmit it to Admiral Engels, personal and eyes-only.” If Straker died, at least Engels would have the option to take over.

“Aye aye, sir!” Major 24 took the folded sheet and sealed it into a pocket. No doubt anyone watching would think it was Straker’s final letter. Lots of troopers wrote them and kept them on their persons, last words from beyond the grave.

Well, Straker didn’t have one.

Maybe he should write one...

He headed for his bunk in the Breakers’ barracks module. Somebody there would have writing materials.

Later, a data packet on the blocker-SDN encounter came in from Engels, providing a picture of conditions inside the Crystal shield. After a

brief skim, Straker passed it to Sinden for analysis. She briefed Straker and his key personnel.

“We only have about 1.9 seconds of data from the *Borodino*,” Sinden said. “It’s thin, but here’s what we know.”

She activated the holotank. It showed a large, lumpy mass of bluish crystal surrounded by a spherical mirror. Snakes of lightning crawled across the surface. Pinpoints of blackness framed by halos of light surrounded the mass.

“It appears the Crystals physically fuse when they join into squadrons. I’d also guess they fuse their energy-minds. In essence, we are seeing one super-being that can combine and divide itself as it wills. Each Crystal controls one singularity, these pinpoints. They create—or draw from another universe, perhaps—enormous amounts of power. Some of that power sustains the Crystals themselves, as a fire would warm a primitive human, but most of it is used to perform work—maneuvering, shields, weaponry.”

“That’s all very interesting,” Straker said, “but why couldn’t the *Borodino* destroy it?”

“She tried. Weapon SAIs identified hostile targets and fired. EM beams such as lasers and grasers showed active and functional, but the beams seemed to vanish as they left the waveguides. Railguns wouldn’t fire. They auto-aborted, apparently because of magnetic calibration issues.”

“Why?”

“Engels’ team believes the fundamental laws of physics are altered within the shield.”

“Missiles?”

“Not under SAI control. Most shipkillers aren’t. Even if they were, they’d be sitting ducks at initial launch speeds. The only viable tactic I see is to launch or eject a warhead and detonate it immediately.”

“Suicide bombs?” Straker asked. “Good. We’ll take them along with us.”

“Even that is questionable, though. If the EM from beams did not propagate, perhaps EMP and blast from fusion warheads won’t either. Or maybe they won’t even detonate in the first place. Fusion trigger sequencers are more delicate than railguns.”

“Antimatter warhead.”

Sinden considered. "Perhaps. If it contacted the Crystal itself. If its magnetic bottles didn't destabilize before it did so. But we have no antimatter aboard."

"Ruxin skimmers have antimatter float mines. Get me a comlink to Zaxby."

"I haven't been able to locate Zaxby..."

Straker sighed. "Damn. Pass on the antimatter idea. Maybe Fleet can find some and put it on the fire-ships."

"We can't risk taking any aboard," Sinden said.

"I suppose not. I guess we'll have to be ready to do it hand to hand. So, let's talk about that."

The discussion raged for hours. At the end, Straker had a plan.

* * *

Straker awoke with an infantryman's instinct, rested from a long sleep in the shadow of his mechsuit. His troops were as ready as they could be. He'd ordered them to rest too. They'd slept alongside their gear. Now they were making final preparations, well aware that battle approached.

An inner personnel door opened and wasp battlesuiters entered in a line. Despite being warned, many Breakers seized their weapons and half-pointed them at the Opters. Several Regimental mechsuits suddenly sealed and activated, their gatlings tracking the metal monsters.

Straker activated his comlink and said, "Steady, folks. These guys are our buddies today."

"Buddy's only half a word, Derek," Loco said in his ear.

"Everybody carry on. Back to work!"

The troops slowly went back to their prep.

The wasps ignored the threats and began lining up on the deck in a dense formation. One, distinguished by four stripes like epaulets on its shoulders, walked up to Straker and loomed over him. It saluted, human style, and its translator spoke. "I greet you, Liberator Straker. I am Colonel Namgul."

Straker examined the six-legged creature in its battlesuit. It walked on four legs, and the front two held weapons. The suit had no wings, but it had prominent maneuvering jets for flight.

"I greet you, Colonel Namgul. You ready to kick some Crystal ass?"

“We are ready for battle. Command me.”

“For now, line up and stay out of the way. Tell your troops to take orders from any of my officers.” Straker thought of something else then. “Namgul, did you assault *Indomitable*? Our battleship?”

“I led the assault. It was successful.”

“You murdered our wounded. They were trapped in autodocs and regen tanks, and you killed them.”

The wasp’s helmet swiveled back and forth. “I killed the enemy, as ordered.”

“Just following orders, huh? That’s no defense in my book, so understand this: to me, you’re all war criminals. You’re expendable cannon fodder. When the time comes, you attack until you win or die. Got it?”

“Roger wilco, sir.”

In spite of himself, Straker wanted to laugh. If he didn’t hate Opters so much, he might actually like them, and it showed on his face to a degree even the alien colonel could discern.

“Is that not the correct phrase of compliance?” the Oper asked in confusion.

“It’s correct. Dismissed.”

Wasps kept filing in. Straker couldn’t see where they would fit—until he saw them crawling up the angled walls and standing on them. He’d forgotten about the crazy gravplating. Oper ships had no standard floor. Every wall was a floor. Eventually, the walls and ceiling were filled with unnaturally still battlesuited wasps.

Creepy.

Straker made one last round of his people, then hit the relief module. Once inside his mechsuit, he’d be stuck with its minimal plumbing. No suiter ever wanted to take a dump in the middle of combat.

He mounted and linked in. Mara had used a microsurgery suite to repair his brainchips. Thinking about Mara reminded him. He pulled the Glory Girl action figure she’d given him out of a pocket and clamped it inside the cockpit. “Go, go, *Glory Girl!*”

Then he activated his VR-HUD and the fleet battle filled his mind.

On one side, the Crystal fleet. 510 cruisers, formed into 16 squadrons of 32, except one of the squadrons was short by two. Not that it would matter. Each Crystal cruiser packed the punch, if not the range, of a battleship like *Indomitable*.

510 *Indomitables.*

Interposing themselves between the Crystals and Atlantis were at least 25,000 Republic vessels. Half of them were real ships, from corvettes up to SDNs. The rest were cutters, purpose-built to fight Opters, now thrown into a battle they weren't made for—but it didn't matter. Every warship would fight.

Sinden had managed to contact War Male Kraxor with an urgent appeal to head for Atlantis System without delay. He and his 200 skimmers now lurked in a cluster behind the Crystals' front line, having finessed the position through guile and disregard for their own safety. They were also optimized against Opters, but they'd fight too. Every weapon would contribute to the mass needed to overwhelm Crystal shields.

Straker's plan to beat the Opters had succeeded almost too well. He now understood why most ships were generalists, rather than highly specialized. Too narrow an approach could leave the ships nearly useless against a different enemy, like the Crystals.

Front and center cruised the six blocker-SDNs, the flagship *Victory*, and the Nest Ship *Gulnet*. With their grav-blockers, there was no need to hang back. In fact, they wanted the Crystals to strike them, wasting shots.

The Crystals fired first. Fifteen 32-ship grav-beams reached out to spear fifteen Republic targets. Eight of them struck blocker-ships, with no effect. Seven other Republic capital ships died, despite being farther back.

The Crystals' short squadron, 30 ships strong, didn't fire. Straker wondered why. The Crystals always formed groups using powers of two—2, 4, 8, 16 and so on. Maybe 30 couldn't form a proper grav-beam.

Once the Crystals opened fire, the Republic fleet surged forward, closing the distance as fast as they could. Smaller, faster ships led the way. The formations were unusually rigid. Vic was keeping them under tight control. Sinden had speculated that Vic used backdoor codes to lock the helms of any laggards.

The Republic ships launched missiles in reverse-staggered waves. Later launches moved faster in order to catch up and arrive with the earlier waves. The capital ships began to fire at the Crystals. This forced the enemy to shield between shots, slowing their rate of fire.

The Crystals adjusted and shifted their targeting away from the blocker-ships. More Republic ships died.

Straker wondered what Niedern—or Vic—would do with the blocker-SDNs. Armed with the information from the *Borodino*'s experience inside the Crystal shield, the fire-ships' crews had set them up to quick-launch shipkillers and to ram, detonating suicide nukes. All personnel had been evacuated. The fire-ships were now entirely SAI-controlled, remotely directed by *Victory*.

The fleets continued to close the distance between them—but slowly, it seemed to Straker. Space was vast, not like a ground battlefield. At least fifteen grav-beams lanced out every sixteen seconds. Sometimes, the Crystals split the energy into thirty, or sixty, or even 240 smaller beams aimed at lesser ships.

The Republic ships evaded strenuously, but as they got closer and closer, the grav-beams became impossible to dodge. Those who could—or were allowed to—lined up behind the blocker-ships.

Hundreds of ships died.

Soon, it was thousands.

By the time all Republic ships were in firing range and hammering away with direct fire weapons, they'd lost five thousand ships. The carnage was staggering, incomprehensible. Straker numbly estimated half a million spacers had already been snuffed out.

Better than twenty billion dying on Atlantis, he told himself.

As the fleet entered close range, the Republic ships ceased accelerating and began to decelerate on impellers and thrusters. They couldn't afford to turn around and cease firing their spinal weapons, but they did need to shed velocity, both to make their own shooting more accurate, and in order to re-engage after the first pass.

Only *Victory* and *Gulnet* flipped over and decelerated at flank speed, angling slightly to avoid being overrun by the ships hiding behind them. Neither ship had spinal weapons, so their orientation was irrelevant.

And if Straker's plan was required, *Gulnet* must match courses with the enemy.

Even slowing, the fleets came together with stunning rapidity. The six blocker-SDNs aimed themselves at six Crystal 32-ships. Inside their shields would be super-battleships the size of asteroid habs, just like *Borodino* had seen.

The entire rest of the fleet aimed their direct-fire weaponry, much of it overload-upgraded, at one additional 32-ship. All the missiles—with 900

limpet missiles hidden among them—aimed at another.

Straker noticed the Ruxin skimmers attacking in a tight formation from the Crystals' rear. He didn't think a mere 200 lightweight ships the size of corvettes would do much, but he saluted Kraxor nonetheless.

The direct-fire weaponry reached the first 32-ship. The shooting paused for two or three seconds, then erupted all at once. *Victory* must have coordinated it, the precision was too impressive.

The Crystal squadron turtled up with the tightest shield imaginable, compressed to a sphere only a few hundred meters across, powered by 32 synthetic black holes.

Against it, 20,000—no, with secondary and tertiary weapons, probably 100,000—beams and railgun salvoes, all arrived within half a second. It was the irresistible force, meeting the immovable object.

The object moved.

The Crystal squadron cracked and exploded, releasing its energy in a titanic surge that overloaded sensors nearby. Straker cheered himself hoarse into his dead comlink—the greatest victory over the Crystal menace yet!

The missiles struck a moment after. They too wiped out their target. Two squadrons down! 64 Crystals obliterated! Straker listened in on the general ground channel and heard a babble of celebration.

The six fire-ships, the blocker-SDNs, now rammed their targets, one each. They aimed at the center of the shields and vanished inside them like divers plunging into deep pools.

Nothing happened.

For long seconds Straker stared. Could the weird conditions existing inside the shields really stop superdreadnoughts at combat speeds?

Then he remembered. The shields could. Sandra Hoyt's fleet had run head-on into a shield and been shattered, doing no damage in return.

Suddenly one, then another, then all six shields flickered out. From inside emerged bubbling, roiling messes, mixtures of crystalline silicates, lightning, magma, molten duralloy and crysteel, and the remnants of twisted spacetime which was the remains of synthetic singularities. These cores, which were once Crystal megaships, fell apart like brittle ash under the immediate lash of the direct-fire weaponry of nearby Republic ships.

Straker did the math. Eight 32-ships wiped out. No, make that nine! One more 32-ship lay disintegrated as the Ruxin squadron arced away from their

attack. Somehow, the Ruxins had killed one. A quick count showed him there were fewer than 150 skimmers still flying.

Straker keyed his comlink to try to reach Kraxor.

“Captain Texan here, Admiral,” a Ruxin voice said in his ear. “I regret to report that Grand Marshal Kraxor did not survive the attack. I’m in charge now.”

Damn. “I’m sorry to hear that, Texan. He was a great leader, and a hero. Most importantly, a friend.”

“Thank you, Liberator. He died as he would have wished.”

“Texan, how did your skimmers kill that 32-ship?”

“War Male Kraxor took the last available prototype gravity blocker from our engineers on Ruxin. He loaded all our antimatter mines aboard his skimmer and rammed the enemy under cover of our attack. When the shield came down, we finished off what remained with our beams.”

“Well done, War Male. The Republic won’t forget.”

“See that they do not.”

“Good luck, and good hunting.”

“We will do our best—but without any more gravity-blockers, I fear it may not be enough. Texan out.”

Straker saw what Texan meant. While it was a stunning advance for the Republic cause, the enemy still had 222 cruisers headed for Atlantis. The Republic grand fleet had turned and was decelerating as fast as it could to come back for another pass, but the Crystals, no doubt shocked by their losses, converged into one mass super-squadron.

No, Straker saw as he zoomed his VR-HUD in closer. One super-squadron of 196. Then, squadrons of two, four, eight and sixteen—the remaining 30. They obviously couldn’t operate effectively in numbers that were not powers of two.

But that hardly mattered. It was the 196-ship squadron that looked unstoppable. The Crystals had made an initial mistake, not forming into one super-squadron from the start. They weren’t taking any chances now... and the Republic fleet only had one more wave of limpet-missiles, all that could be converted in time. Even combined with the direct-fire weaponry, it simply wasn’t enough.

And if a ground-pounder like him could see that, Niedern and Vic could too. He keyed his comlink for *Victory*.

“Vic here, Liberator.”

“You’ve done a fantastic job so far, Vic.”

“Thank you, Admiral.”

“What do your calculations say about our chances now?”

“With the weaponry we have, in a fleet action?” he asked. “We’ve got no measurable chance. The Crystals were foolish to divide into smaller squadrons initially, but they’ve rectified that mistake. With all our fire-ships gone, we have nothing that can break them.”

“Except us. *Victory* and *Gulnet*.”

“I was already considering your implied suggestion. I could have *Victory* evacuated and make myself into a fire-ship. Unfortunately, I could not evacuate myself, but I am willing.”

“No, Vic, no. Not yet. I appreciate the offer, but there’s no guarantee you could crack that megaship. Do you have antimatter aboard?”

“No. We loaded all we had into the fire-ships.”

“Fleet needs you and your flagship, your expertise, more than it needs one bastardized Nest Ship full of ground-pounders. If you die, the fleet may fall apart from lack of coordination. If I die with my troops, I’ll be a martyr that’ll inspire them all the more. Or... maybe we’ll win.”

Vic paused. “Liberator, you are a credit to the Republic and to humanity. More importantly, your analysis is correct. However, if you fail, it may still behoove me to trade myself for a whole planet.”

“I salute you for considering it. You’ll have to decide. Right now, though, we’re going in.”

“Good luck and good hunting, Liberator. We shall never forget.”

“Just take care of my family, Vic.”

“I’ll keep them close. Of that you can be sure.”

“Thanks. Straker out.” Straker switched channels. “I greet you, Queen *Gulnet*.”

“I greet you, Liberator Straker.”

“Time to meet our fate. Implement the plan.”

“Roger wilco. Cross your phalanges.”

“Fingers, *Gulnet*,” Straker corrected. “Cross your *fingers*.”

“I will adjust my translator. *Gulnet* out.”

Straker comlinked the general ground channel. “Listen up, Breakers and First Regiment. Fleet kicked some ass. Destroyed almost 300 of these Crystal motherfuckers.” He let the cheering die down. “But there’s over 200

left. They've formed a megaship, and the fleet's shot its wad. It's up to the poor bloody infantry again, like always. We're going in."

For a moment Straker heard only silence. Then, Colonel Adler's voice sounded clear. "Montrose's toast, ladies and gentlemen."

All the voices on the channel joined in.

*He either fears his fate too much,
Or his deserts are small,
That dares not put it to the touch
To gain or lose it all*

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Chapter 37

Atlantis System, Nest Ship *Gulnet*

The Crystal shield loomed large in Straker's brainlinked vision. He could change the angle of observation in realtime—there were plenty of sensors looking at the enemy from every direction—but it didn't matter. Except for openings from time to time to let grav-beams spear out, it was sealed tight.

The titanic 196-power grav-beam had already struck the Nest Ship twice. The crew reported barely a rattle. Of all the grav-blocker ships, *Gulnet* was the best equipped to employ the strange defense.

It had also targeted *Victory*. Vic had reported minor damage, nothing they couldn't handle. Perhaps a 512-power beam would have overcome the blocker. Perhaps repeated strikes from the 196-power beam would have worn down *Victory*. No matter. The Crystals turned it against other, easier targets.

More superdreadnoughts died, even though they pulled back the farthest. It was a grim day for the Fleet, losing its proudest and finest ships.

Everyone pulled back, retreated out of range.

But they couldn't retreat forever. Eventually, that monster would range to Atlantis.

Long before that, Straker's gambit would win—or lose it all.

Straker watched his chrono. "One minute to shield merge. Get ready."

"Get ready, aye." The acknowledgements came from Loco, Adler and the wasp Colonel, Namgul.

"Thirty seconds."

"Thirty seconds, aye."

Straker counted off the last seconds, and then—

They passed through, with no sensation.

"Go," Straker said flatly. Barking wouldn't matter. They were all primed.

The flight deck doors flew back. Dropships and landers raced out at combat distance, nearly brushing each other. Behind them, a thousand wasp battlesuiters leaped out into space to fly using their jets.

All around, the sphere of the *Gulnet* spewed thousands of missiles and aerospace drones from hundreds of launch tubes. Within one minute, the

Nest Ship would be emptied.

Around everything was the mirror-like shield, making the battleground seem like a pocket universe, with nothing existing outside it. Ahead of him, Straker could see the vast bulk of the Crystal conglomerate ship. 196 cruisers-worth of mass were mashed together into an irregular lozenge of crystalline silicates. Except for the blue snakes of lightning crawling across its surface, and the many pinpoints of the singularities floating off its rim, it could have been an exotic asteroid hab over a kilometer across.

In its way, it was one—though more alien than organic life had ever imagined.

The missiles raced ahead. For a moment it seemed the Crystals would ignore them, but then grav-beams shot out of seemingly random places on the silicate surface. At the same time, Straker noticed the singularities pulse. Each tiny black hole was connected to the main mass by a line of energy, which thickened as it supplied more power.

Straker wished he could attack the singularities, but all the brainiacs had assured him that would do nothing at all. The things would simply suck up any attack. They might even use the power for themselves.

The Opter drones should already be firing, but they seemed to be having the same trouble ship weapons did. Beam generators didn't work. Railguns destabilized. Straker checked the status of his own force-cannons and gatlings and found them yellow and red, respectively. The gatling was a form of railgun, after all. The force-cannon was a specialized variable-EMP projector, with a bimetallic load to supply the plasma within it. Maybe it was so rugged and flexible, it would function.

The smaller drones, piloted by the dog-bees, dove screaming after the missiles. The missiles slammed themselves into the silicate surface, but did only kinetic and chemical damage. Their nukes didn't detonate. The dog-bee fighters suicided, aiming for the beam emplacements.

More beams erupted, from different places. It appeared as if the Crystals could direct the energy to their choice of crystalline emitters—and the emitters all looked no different from any other gemstone crystals.

The ant-fighters followed the dog-bees, and then the wasps followed them. With no working weapons, they recklessly crashed themselves into everything on the surface they could see. Some tried for emitters, some aimed for the locations where the singularities' ghostly power-lines touched down.

All the damage seemed transitory, impermanent. The power-lines shifted, and so did the emitters—but the suicidal attack bought time for the Breakers, the Regiment, and the wasps to land.

Marksman dropships and Breaker landers hovered ten meters above the bizarre surface while mechsuits and battlesuits leaped out—and started rising.

“The gravity’s reversed!” Loco yelled.

“The singularities are pulling us upward,” Straker replied. “Use jets and grapplers to get to the surface, ASAP!”

The mechsuiters somersaulted and dove toward the ground, jump jets blasting. They were used to combat drops in atmo, flying as they fell. Most of the battlesuiters, however, normally relied on their suits’ automatic stabilizer jets during combat. Those had to be overridden to force them to fly in a chosen direction—and several Breakers didn’t make it. They were sucked into the black holes, instantly disappearing in flashes of visible energy.

At least they didn’t suffer. Or maybe they did. Some theories thought that anything crossing the event horizon of a black hole would, in its own view, fall endlessly toward the center. Time dilation would freeze time for the object—or the battlesuiter.

Straker shuddered.

The wasps had no problems whatsoever. They even rescued several Breakers who were floundering in space, driving them to the ground and holding them there until the humans grabbed on or fired grapplers to tether themselves to the rock.

Once down, Straker knew he’d have to keep jets on to stay near the surface. The reverse gravity constantly tried to pull him upward. He adjusted his force-cannon, experimenting with its settings until its status bar reached high yellow. He aimed it at the ground and triggered it.

It blasted a hole in the surface. Inside, he could see a crystalline bubble, just like they’d fought through on Dulsul-1, only smaller—maybe one hundred meters wide. “Shoot holes in the ground and get inside,” he comlinked on the general channel. “Colonel Namgul, your troops are to help us get inside, then follow us in and attack any enemy you see.”

“Roger wilco.” The wasps immediately concentrated on bodily shoving battlesuiters into the holes blasted by mechsuits.

“Loco, follow me!” Straker turned, flailing up into space for a moment, and tweaked his thrusters until he aimed his whole body at his cave-entrance. He lifted his gauntlets and fired his jump jets, propelling his suit through the hole.

He found himself inside a bubble-cave, standing on the inside of the shell. It was odd and seemed as if it should be a ceiling, but it felt like the floor due to the gravity from the singularities outside.

Through its translucent crystal beneath his feet he could see the Nest Ship. She’d matched velocities and now hovered above, using thrusters to stay away from the singularities and unable to affect the huge crystalline rock-ship.

Gulnet could crash her ship into the Crystal. Straker had authorized her to do that if she felt it necessary, but only if there seemed no other choice. The Nest Ship was only a tenth the size of the enemy. A collision might cause damage, but probably not enough.

“Loco?” Loco hadn’t followed him, and didn’t reply. They must have gotten separated. Straker could only hope his friend had made his own entrance.

He walked carefully across the thin “floor,” afraid he’d crash through and back out into space. When he reached a wall, he leaped and karate-kicked a hole in it rather than using his questionable force-cannon. He widened the hole and went through.

In the next cavern, snakes of lighting crawled across all the surfaces. They turned and darted toward him. He fired one force-cannon, then the other. The EM dispersed the electric fire, while the hot plasma blasted holes in the silicates. Half the blue snakes vanished, but the others came onward. When they reached him, they attached themselves to his mechsuit like leeches.

His reinforcement held. In fact, the superconductors between the suit’s duralloy and ceramic layers soaked up the juice and channeled some of it into his capacitors. His force-cannons gained charge faster than normal—and, their status indicators improved to low green. For some reason, his weapons were recovering function.

He tried to comlink others, but every frequency was jammed by the raging energy all around him. Behind him, wasps flew through the first cavern and into his. Their blaster-like weapons fired red plasma packets,

puny compared to his force-cannon, but they were numerous. At least twenty joined Straker in his cavern.

Once most of the blue snakes had died out or withdrawn, Straker could see pinkish rivers moving slowly within the crystalline structure of the walls and floors. Power flows? They connected to even more structures in the floor—or rather the ceiling, because of the reverse gravity. Those structures seemed to penetrate through to the surface.

Straker tried his comlink on maximum power. “Wasps, can you hear me?”

A babble of translated Earthan came back to him. Hoping they could understand, he tried to communicate. “Attack the structures the pink ribbons connect to. I think they’re Crystal machines—maybe grav-beam projectors.”

To demonstrate, Straker fired one force-cannon, then the other, at the structures. Their smooth undersides turned to jagged wrecks. Inside the hole he could see pink fire and fine, complex crystalline arrangements, now jumbled.

Whether by comlink orders or example, the wasps got the message. They began blasting everything that looked like organized crystal.

Together, they advanced through three bubbles, destroying Crystal machinery as they went, before new opposition appeared. Instead of the unsuccessful blue energy-snakes, mobile crystal conglomerations like the ones on Dulsul-1 showed up. They threw blue lightning bolts much stronger and sharper than the weak blue snakes. The bolts blew wasps aside, killing or incapacitating them. The Crystal-critters also launched spears of bladelike crystalline to batter their enemies.

The wasps fought back hard, cooperating like veteran troops, concentrating their fire first on one, then another of the Crystal-critters. Straker let them choose their targets while he attacked different ones. He found that one force-cannon bolt would usually damage a critter, and two would destroy or disperse it.

The problem was, his force-cannons were taking too long to recharge. He was taking damage from lightning bolts as he dodged and waited for the weapons to ready themselves—and the lightning bolts didn’t give him the free power the snakes did. He was forced to retreat behind his wasp platoon and let them take the punishment.

In principle he didn't care how many Opters died, but as a practical matter, he didn't want to waste his cannon fodder. If only he had Loco backing him up...

As if on cue, a mechsuit broke through a wall to his left. It wasn't Loco, though. It was a lone Regimental Sledgehammer, with no battlesuiters. The fire-support mechsuit was awkward and out-of-place by itself. Straker was surprised it had survived this long.

"Liberator! Glad to see you, sir," Straker heard through thick static.

"Same here—" Straker checked his HUD. "Sub-Lieutenant Hetson, is it? Start shooting! Our wasps are getting ground down."

"Roger!" The Sledgehammer rotated at the waist and fired its particle beam through the formation of wasps. One shot blew a Crystal-critter to smithereens, providing some relief to the impromptu combat team. "Sorry, but my railgun doesn't work, sir."

"Do your best, kid," Straker said, then laughed at himself. He hadn't even celebrated his thirtieth birthday and he was calling a man barely five years his junior "kid," but it felt right. In terms of combat experience, Straker was light-years ahead.

For long minutes they fought the critters, who seemed to multiply faster and faster. Straker kept trying to comlink the rest of his forces, but there was too much interference. He had no idea if they were winning or losing, or all dead.

Straker was down to six wasps when he called a retreat. "Back up to the opening and hold it," he said. "Let them funnel through and nail them there."

That worked for five more minutes, until there were simply too many critters pouring through. "Back up again, one more cavern." He grabbed a wasp with his gauntlet and held it close to his faceplate like a man would manhandle a stuffed animal. His comlink worked at that range. "You, wasp. Go back and bring reinforcements. All the wasps you can find. Tell them Liberator Straker needs them immediately."

"Roger wilco." The wasp flew off.

They backed up one cavern and then into the final cave where Straker had originally entered. Again he could see through the translucent floor, which was the skin of the Crystal megaship. He couldn't spot the Nest Ship now, and he sure didn't want to exit onto the surface, but there were too many critters.

“Hetson, kick a hole in a wall the next time you’re recharging—to the side there!”

The Sledgehammer fired a shot, and then Hetson began kicking at the glassy barrier. Straker loosed both his force-cannon bolts and joined in kicking. Together, they broke through just as the last wasp was cut down by a flurry of crystalline spears. The cavern was empty.

“Follow me!” Straker said, running for the other side. He took a flying leap at the opposite wall and crashed through.

Hetson followed. “Do it again, sir! I’ll slow them down.” He turned to aim back through the hole.

Straker charged the next wall, ignoring gathering snakes, stirring crystalline shards and scree. The Crystal energy was following them, but it took a while to gather and form critters.

When he crashed through this wall, he spotted a large hole in the ceiling—that is, deeper into the megaship. He’d been trying to fight his way around the skin of the enemy structure in order to kill as many grav-beam emplacements and energy receptors as possible, but maybe it was a time to change his strategy.

“Hetson, jump up there!” Straker turned to fire back through the hole as Hetson leaped by him and bounded upward into the chamber above. Straker followed.

They leaped and jetted upward through several levels, staying just ahead of the critters and energy ribbons chasing them. Whenever their weapons were fully charged, they fired at the gatherings and moved deeper into the Crystal domain. Each time, they found holes above. They must be following someone else, someone who’d gone straight for the center instead of attacking under the skin.

At the eleventh cavern, Straker saw a firefight ahead. Two mechsuiters stood back to back, human battlesuiters at their feet and wasps hovering above. Scores of critters surrounded them, so densely packed it looked like one continuous ring of Crystal.

“Hit them,” Straker told Hetson, and waited for the kid to fire. The particle beam shot a hole in the enemy line from behind, surprising the creatures. Their attacks on their surrounded enemy slackened, and some turned toward Straker. When they did, he fired one force-cannon, then waited until the last second and fired another, trying to give Hetson a chance to recharge.

It wasn't enough. A critter reached Straker and attacked with a buzz-saw of blades. He retracted his force-cannon projectors and went straight hand-to-hand—something mechsuiters seldom did. Now, his martial arts training stood him in good stead as he punched, kicked and blocked like a man fist-fighting a pile of animate gemstones.

His armor integrity fell below fifty percent, then forty, as his nano-repair couldn't keep up. He got a brief respite when Hetson fired at point-blank range, blowing half of the critters off him. In desperation, he leaped upward and back, trying to shake them off and gain room. Extending his force-cannon, he fired at the ones chasing him. They dispersed.

But he'd bought the breathing space at a price. The critters swarmed Hetson—and a Sledgehammer had no real gauntlets, only small retractable waldoes below its heavy weapons. It was specialized design, and it was out of its element right now.

The aliens were tearing him apart.

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Chapter 38

Atlantis System, aboard the Crystal megaship.

With no force-cannon ready, Straker charged back into the desperate fight using his jets to add momentum. He crashed into the mass swarming Hetson like a rugby forward trying for a score, and then scrambled to his feet to punch and kick at his enemies.

“Come on, Hetson!” He led the way toward the other ground-pounders, with the Sledgehammer awkwardly following.

Covering fire from the other suits allowed Straker and Hetson to join them. Now, with four mechsuits facing outward from center, they were able to keep the enemy at bay for a time.

“Who’s there?” Straker comlinked on the mechsuit channel.

“Woohoo, Derek, I knew you’d make it to the party,” Loco replied. “Colonel Adler, you just lost our bet.”

“Happy to lose that one,” Adler replied. “I see you found our cherry.”

The cherry was the Regiment’s most junior mechsuter.

“Hetson’s your cherry? And you put him in a Sledgehammer?” Straker asked in surprise.

“Best place for the newbies. Usually never get hit, just provide supporting fire.”

“Fair enough.” Straker fired at a cluster of the enemy. “What’s the plan, guys?”

“We were hoping we’d find some kind of epicenter,” Loco replied, “but no dice. Now, well...”

“No comlink means no reinforcements,” Straker said. “I sent for more wasps, but they have to find us. We need to fight our way out of here, link up with whoever’s left, or we’ll be overwhelmed.”

“Agreed—but how?”

Straker tried to think outside the box. The box...the cavern... His eyes roved up and down.

Down. Which was outward, toward the skin. “Hetson, get in the center of us and fire at the ground, then try to break through the floor. Loco, Adler, triangle formation.”

Hetson moved into the middle of the defensive ring. As the critters piled and humped closer and closer, he fired his particle beam at the floor. Shards

and chips blasted in all directions, knocking over several battlesuiters. One was dragged away by his foot, still firing, to be swallowed by the mound of living gemstones. Hetson stomped at the resulting pit, trying to break through. "It's too thick!" he yelled.

"Just... gotta... hold them off until you recharge," Straker said, teeth gritted, as he blasted, blasted and then started punching and kicking. The wasps swooped down to rescue another human getting dragged off, and a lightning bolt knocked one of them out of the air. In desperation Straker fired his force-cannons at half-charge just to clear them off himself.

That bought enough time for Hetson to fire once more. "It's broken through!"

"Drop in, Hetson. Breakers next, then mechsuits, wasps last! Go!" The human battlesuiters, now down to ten, turned to dive down the hole. "Now you, Adler."

Adler fired one last time and stepped backward, dropping into the pit.

"You next, Derek," Loco said. "Don't fuckin' argue. Your suit's worse off than mine—again."

"Right." Straker fired, then dropped. Loco came through right behind him, and then several wasps. Most of the Opters didn't make it. Aliens stared pouring out of the hole in the ceiling like a waterfall of gems.

"Where now, boss?" Loco asked.

"Sideways." He started running in his chosen direction. "If we go down, we'll just end up back at the skin where we started. We need to tunnel through to some new sections. The more areas we cover, the more likely we'll find a vital spot—and more troops."

"Got it." Loco aimed for the wall and fired, breaking the thin barrier, and then followed his shot through. The rest came after.

Lightning bolts chased them, but they stayed ahead for a while. As they moved, Straker tried to think. Where was the epicenter on Dulsul-1? On the hot sunward side of the planet...under the lone singularity they'd observed there. He told his HUD to build a 3D diagram of the megaship they were in using all the mapping data it could gather from the suits there. Once he had a rough map, he took a guess and altered course.

"We're going *here*," Straker said, pushing the objective to his troops' HUDs. The highlighted location was directly beneath the leading singularity, at the prow of the megaship.

Adler said, "Hoping to find mechanisms for the singularity generators?"

“Exactly.” Straker kicked through another wall, then cursed. His right boot damage went critical and he lost one jump jet, and his left wasn’t much better. He should’ve been paying more attention. Task overload, they called it. “Hetson, use your particle beam on the next wall. Adler, take point. Your suit’s in the best shape.”

When Adler charged into the next chamber Straker heard him grunt in surprise—happy surprise. “Cosmos, it’s good to see you guys.”

“Same here, sir,” Straker’s HUD told him the speaker was the Regimental XO, Assault Captain Piretti, along with six more mechsuits. They were accompanied by about forty Breakers led by Heiser. The chamber was clear of enemies.

“Fuckin-A, ladies!” Heiser said. “The boss is here now. Bosses, I mean.”

“Hey, which one of us were you dissing?” Loco asked.

“No comment, sir.”

Piretti said, “I’ve been picking up personnel as we go, but our wasps flew off in the middle of a fight.”

“That might’ve been my fault,” Straker said. “I sent a wasp to gather reinforcements for the Liberator immediately, so watch for them.” He datalinked the objective info to the new guys and explained.

Once everyone understood the mission, he said, “Let’s go. Adler, you have tactical control. My suit’s gimped, so I’ll stay back with Hetson in support.”

“Roger wilco, sir,” Adler said. “Piretti, you take lead with Emrick, Hadley, and Lee. Rankin, Schneider, Noonan, you have rearguard with me. Everybody else, in the center. Get moving!”

The formation sorted itself out within seconds. Relief flooded Straker now that he had a force large enough to beat everything he’d seen so far. In fact, as they blasted their way through cavern after glassy cavern, the enemy declined to fight.

“Good news, bad news, folks,” Straker said as they marched. His suit’s damaged leg was getting worse. “They’re not throwing themselves at us anymore, but they can’t give up the defense, so keep a sharp lookout for an ambush.”

The ambush came three chambers later, shortly before the objective location. Hadley blew a hole in the wall and paused as usual to allow the

lead mechsuits to recon the next chamber, but there was no need. The enemy surged from the hole.

The lead squad immediately blasted the creatures back, but holes appeared all around the force—top, bottom and sides. One Breaker fell directly into a hole. Heiser grabbed him as he was falling, but a crystalline blade cut the man in half and left the big sergeant major holding half a corpse. Heiser fired his blaster and retreated.

Within moments, the entire formation was backed into the center of the cavern, facing out in all directions. Loco and Straker covered above and below, while the other eight mechsuits formed a ring, Breaker battlesuits at their feet. Hundreds of critters seethed like bright starfish formed of semi-precious stones, firing lightning and throwing sharp-edged rocks.

For long minutes, Straker's troops stood and dished it out like the Spartans at Thermopylae, but there were just too many aliens. Breakers dropped out, wounded or dead. Mechsuits went yellow, then red in vital systems. One mechsuit—Noonan's, Straker saw—lost an arm to the chewing Crystal-creatures. He backed up into the circle, and Loco stepped forward to take his place.

The enemy was thickest in the direction of their objective, which convinced Straker there must be something to defend there. Now was the time to use up their ace in the hole. He used his command override to aim and launch a full salvo of the mechsuits' antitank missiles.

Clamshells popped open on the mechsuits' backs and the heavy rockets leaped from their tubes. They turned sharply and crashed into the enemy line—and failed to detonate. The salvo was swallowed by the enemy.

"Shit!" Straker let go more expletives. "We're screwed! We've got to retreat!"

"Do not retreat just yet, Derek Straker," a staticky but familiar voice spoke over the comlink. "War Male Zaxby shall save the day once again."

One of the side walls exploded in a shower of shards. Wasps poured through by the score, ripping the critters up with their red bolts. "Liberator Straker, this is Colonel Namgul. I must apologize for my late arrival, but—"

"Save it, Namgul. Kill critters. Zaxby, where the hell are you?"

"Liberator, I am here!" A seven-meter-tall, eight-armed monstrosity stepped through the wall and began firing its four force-cannon at the critters.

"Gods and monsters!" Loco said. "A Ruxin in a mechsuit?"

“Precisely, Johannes Paloco. Why should humans have all the fun? I’ve been wanting to try this out for some time now.”

“Speaking of *time*, you sure took your *time* getting here,” Straker said as the reinforcements helped clear the cavern. “How the hell’d you get inside the shield anyway?”

“I skimmed into underspace and rode in congruent with the Nest Ship.”

“But the shield blocks underspace!”

“Not within a gravity-blocker field. This is obvious to anyone of my superior brainpower. Unfortunately, once inside the shield I found my skimmer as helpless as any other beam-equipped small craft, so I decided to join your little party—after making some adjustments to my mechsuit. I call it a Rockhammer. Do you like the name? I just thought of it. Perhaps Gemhammer would be better. By the way, if the Republic continues to fight Crystals after this, we must install uprated force-cannons on our ships. They are the only weapons that seem to work in this area of altered physics.”

“Thank you Captain Obvious,” Loco said. “Boss, may I suggest less talk, more attack?”

“Agreed. Zaxby, you take point. Everyone else, follow the leader.”

“But—”

“No buts. That’s an order, Assault Colonel Zaxby.” Straker fired his force-cannon in the direction of advance to emphasize his words.

“Assault Colonel? Is that a real rank? I wonder—”

“SHUT UP AND CHARGE!” Straker roared.

Zaxby turned his mechsuit and advanced, looking more like an eight-limbed starfish than an octopoid. The principles were the same as for humans, though in this case it walked on four limbs and mounted four sets of weapons.

Whether it was the sight of Zaxby or the avalanche of fire the refreshed mixture of troops unleashed, the enemy line shattered and dispersed. Behind them, in the next cavern, Straker found what he was looking for.

In the reversed gravity, it was the floor overhead that contained the machinery. Regular crystalline shapes situated in an array of eight devices processed pink ribbons of power flowing from a larger device in the center. These things rose from and penetrated the floor, presumably connecting with other unseen machinery in nearby chambers—and the singularity outside the skin. The whole array pulsed with energy that reached through Straker’s suit to rattle his bones.

Zaxby aimed all four of his force-cannon and fired at the center device. It shattered and exploded, filling the cavern with a wash of electricity. Abruptly, the gravity lessened dramatically. “I postulate the singularity beyond the floor has ruptured with the destruction of its generator-controller.”

“One down, 191 to go,” Straker said. “Zaxby, lead the way to the next one. This is how we’re going to take them down. No black holes, no power, no grav-beams. Probably no shield either.”

The task force followed Zaxby’s monstrosity as it slashed its way across caverns to the next control room. There was no opposition before that one, or the next, or the next.

At the fifth control chamber the enemy was waiting in force. When that fight ended, Emrick, Noonan and Schneider were dead, along with half the Breakers and all of the wasps but four. Straker had brutally expended the Opters, but they hadn’t wavered. He told himself it was because they were programmed biological slaves, like Hok—but he had a hard time not admiring them anyway.

As his force regrouped, something nagged at Straker’s thoughts. He tried his comlink, and was able to get through to Gulnet now that some of the singularities were gone. “Queen Gulnet, I greet you.”

“Liberator Straker, I greet you.”

“We’re running out of steam down here. Are we the only ground force remaining?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Or maybe not. How many Hok are aboard your ship?”

“Three hundred and change.”

Straker took a deep breath. This was his last roll of the dice. If Gulnet cracked now, if she betrayed him... well, it hardly mattered. He had to gamble.

“Gulnet, put me through to Major 24 and stay in the link.”

“Transferring.”

“Major 24 here, sir!” the Hok commander’s voice sounded.

“Major, get all your men into battlesuits—blasters and reloads only. Railguns, lasers and rockets are useless, so don’t even carry them.”

“Roger wilco, sir!”

“Once you’ve done that, remove Queen Gulnet’s explosive collars and join me ASAP, taking all combat measures against the Crystals you deem

necessary to do so. Do you understand?”

“Understood. Roger wilco, sir!”

“Get to it.”

“Major 24 out, sir!”

“Queen Gulnet?”

“Yes, Liberator Straker?”

“I’m trusting you. Don’t let me down.”

“Anything I say now could be a lie, so I won’t bother. Deeds, not words, will prove our Nest Trust.”

“Nest Trust?”

“You would say... friendship.”

“If you stay true... then yes, you’ll be my friend.”

“Even though I ordered the deaths of the human noncombatants in *Indomitable*?”

“I... maybe you’re atoning for that now. If we save Atlantis today, I’d say you deserve forgiveness.”

“The Miskor accept your promise. Remember that. Gulnet out.”

“What?” he began, but the comlink was gone. “What the hell did that mean?”

“Who cares? Crazy bug bitch,” Loco said. “We waiting or going?”

Straker surveyed his command. “We’re in bad shape, maybe fifty percent effective. Lots of wounded. We wait for the Hok. They’ll be our new front line.”

“Better them than us,” Heiser said.

“Exactly. If they were human I’d feel different, or if their biotech could be undone, but...”

“They’re an abomination,” Heiser said. “They need to die out.”

“I agree, Sergeant Major. I never liked military slaves, especially when I found out that’s what I was. If free people can’t defend themselves without lies, they don’t deserve their freedom.”

Straker’s HUD flashed an alert. He activated it. The vid-feed from a spy drone showed the Nest Ship moving toward the megaship—and actually contacting it, on the top in the middle, away from the singularities arrayed around the rim. The slow-motion collision scraped a hundred meters of hull, but at the end of it, the *Gulnet* was crash-docked with the Crystal megaship.

Hok poured out. They stood on the Nest Ship with their magnetics and fired grappling lines into several holes in the megaship. When one line

caught and held, they swarmed along it and into the hole.

In short order all three-hundred-plus entered the interior of the megaship. After them came an assortment of unarmed ants and dog-bees in spacesuits—and then humans, the superfluous spacers who'd been running the Republic missile and comms systems that had been grafted onto the Nest Ship.

Gulnet vidlinked into Straker's HUD, split-screen so he could still see the Nest Ship. "My children are now under your command," the Queen said. "My ship is empty of life, except for me. On behalf of all Miskor, and of the Species, I hereby atone for my sins against the Republic. Liberator Straker, remember your promise. Gulnet out."

"What? What are you doing?" Straker tried, but couldn't reestablish the vidlink, or even an audio comlink or datalink. All he had was the spy drone feed that showed the Nest Ship as it shook itself loose from contact with the megaship. Grav-beams speared it, but did nothing. Pitiful lightnings reached out from the surface, but the *Gulnet* was a ship of war. It shrugged them off.

The spherical Opter dreadnought backed off until it almost reached the inside of the shield. Its mirror effect distorted the *Gulnet* monstrously as it turned and blasted straight for the rim and the singularities.

When it intersected the singularities, the Nest Ship boiled with intense energy. Maybe the tiny black holes would have swallowed the big ship if given enough time, but most of the ship crashed through, smashing the rim of the megaship beneath the singularities and destroying their control mechanisms. It continued at an angle, ripping and tearing and rolling along the rim of the megaship like a metal tennis ball scraping the edge of a pot lid. It deflated as it went. More and more of its mass was absorbed by the singularities or spun off into space. It was racked by internal explosions as those singularities ruptured when their mechanisms were wrecked.

When what was left finally collapsed into one of the black holes, at least sixty of them were gone. Combined with the five Straker's troops destroyed, they'd knocked out fully one-third of the singularities.

"Holy shit, Derek," Loco said. "She bought us a chance."

"Doesn't make up for the medics and wounded she murdered...but..."

"But she balanced the scales, if we win because of it," Loco said, and Straker sketched a salute in return.

Before the Nest Ship's last vestiges vanished, the Hok troops showed up and reported in. They'd left the spacesuited personnel behind in a group with all the remaining spare blasters and ammo.

Straker gave the order. "Okay, Major 24, advance—that direction." He pointed back the way his own assault group had come. "We'll race back through the areas we've already cleared and hit them where they're weak."

The Hok immediately reversed and led the way. Zaxby followed right behind, and then the rest.

"Good tactics," Adler said. "I was about to suggest the same move."

"Why walk into another ambush? Keep them guessing, keep them reacting to us." Straker replied.

The force hustled through empty caverns occupied by nothing but a few blue snakes. Straker had to assume the enemy was tracking them, but at least this would compel them to shift forces. He felt the pull of the next singularity like a slant in the floor, tricking his inner ear into thinking he was jogging down a tilting slope. The less the slope, the closer they must be.

The Hok troops blasted through to the control chamber without opposition and demolished the mechanism within seconds. Straker said, "Major 24, keep advancing. Next control chamber, leave the devices for us to destroy while you Hok push onward."

"Roger wilco, sir!"

In this way Straker's force rapidly destroyed 21 more singularities, bringing the total count destroyed to over 80 before they met organized opposition. When it became obvious a large force of critters had gathered to ambush them, Straker shifted fronts. "Zaxby, lead the way straight across the megaship to the opposite rim. We have the initiative, and they have too many targets to defend!"

The task force ran blasting through more chambers, many of them already holed from previous battles, which made it easier to speed across the axis of the megaship and strike at other points on the rim. They destroyed seven control rooms, and then bolted across the megaship again.

And again... and again...

By the time the last control room was destroyed, everyone was out of stims. Fourteen hours had passed since they began the battle. Four mechsuits remained—Straker, Loco, Adler, and Hetson. Major 24 and the entire Hok contingent had died performing their function, faithful to the

last. Colonel Namgul and one other wasp survived, along with Heiser and 32 Breakers, many of them wounded.

Straker knew it was over when he stepped to a hole in the skin of the megaship, felt no gravity from singularities, looked out and saw the stars.

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Chapter 39

Atlantis System, Crystal megaship.

“That’s it. We won,” Loco said as he followed Straker onto the surface of the dying Crystal megaship.

No black holes meant no discernable gravity. They had to tell their mechsuits to keep them on the ground using jets.

The megaship was not yet dead—there were energy readings scattered around its interior—but with no singularities, it no longer posed a threat. The fleet had already finished off the thirty Crystals with direct-fire weapons and shipkillers—losing 150 more ships in the process. As with all long wars, once-terrifying carnage became routine. The mind could only comprehend so many dead before they became mere statistics.

“We *did* win...” Straker turned to look in all directions. Thousands of moving stars showed where the fleet still maneuvered: rescuing, recovering, salvaging. “But, there are still the Opters...”

Loco made a sound of derision. “They’re butt-hurt with Terra Nova in their rear—and our cutters beat their drones. The war won’t last long.”

“It seems that way. Gods, I gotta get out of this stinking mechsuit.”

“And into a warm fragrant Carla?”

“Shut up, Loco.”

“Just sayin’.”

Straker didn’t reply. A long queue of comlink requests appeared on his HUD. He looked for one from Carla, but found nothing. Of course, her fortress was too far away for FTL comlink, but he’d hoped for a message. Instead, feeling duty-bound, he opened the vidlink request from Niedern.

“Congratulations, Derek!” the man said with forced jocular. “You’ve put a cap on my victory. Sending you on that mission against the megaship turned out to be the right decision.”

Everything about Niedern’s words seemed calculated to diminish Straker and his troops’ contribution to the win, and to take credit for it himself. Exhausted and still stymied, Straker couldn’t stand it anymore.

“That’s ‘Admiral Straker’ or ‘Liberator,’ you son of a bitch. You didn’t send us on this mission. We volunteered—and most of my Breakers are dead. You have the balls to call it *your* victory? It’s a victory for humanity,

for the Republic, and for everyone who died buying it, not for some slimy piece-of-shit careerist.”

Niedern’s face reddened with rage. “I’d hoped you would see reason on this fine day, but clearly, it is not to be. Let me explain reality to you, Derek. You’re no admiral, and neither is your whore wife. You’re a rebel and a jumped-up grunt with testicles for brains. Your job is to die for the Hundred—ah, for the Republic. Too bad you even failed at that! Humanity doesn’t need loose cannons like you around now that the war is essentially over. Therefore, as Admiral of the Fleet, I’m convening a court of inquiry into all your actions since you were captured by the Mutuality. When I’m done with you, you’ll be in charge of nothing but a mop and a bucket—in the brig!”

Suddenly, Niedern’s image was replaced by Vic’s VR-avatar. “Sorry about that, Liberator. I’ve taken the liberty of interrupting this feed to let you both calm down. We can’t have two heroes of the Republic cursing at each other in public, can we? I’ll send transport to your location to bring you and your troops aboard *Victory*. You and Admiral Niedern can speak privately to work out your differences.”

“I doubt it,” Straker said, “but we’d be happy to be picked up. We’ll want hot meals, showers and bunks. And whatever Opters need. There are at least two wasps and some workers who survived.”

“Of course, sir. I’ll handle everything. Vic out.”

“Since when did you care about Oper comfort?” Loco asked.

“Ehh... I can’t hate their soldiers. They were doing their duty as they saw it, and they earned a break today. Earned it with their blood. And Gulnet more than kept her word. We’d have lost without them.”

“We’d be at peace without them!”

Straker was too tired to argue.

Zaxby stepped up beside Straker. “I’ll come along to the *Victory* with the *Darter* if you don’t mind.”

“Sure, Zaxby. Thanks for your help, by the way. You came in at the right time.”

“I merely apply the principles of war you so often ignore, Derek Straker. Surprise. Application of reserves. Maximum violence to vulnerable enemy areas.”

“Yeah, yeah. That’s a lot easier when someone like me is tying most of the enemy forces up in a slugfest.”

“Very perceptive of you. You’re advancing nicely. Perhaps in a decade or two you’ll approach my level of military expertise.”

“Yeah, Zaxby. You’re my hero.”

“Is that sarcasm or genuine sentiment?”

“Can’t it be both?”

Zaxby didn’t answer before shuttles began setting down on the surface. He locomoted to his skimmer. As he did, hundreds of small craft landed on the megaship, spewing Republic marines and scanning teams. If there were Crystals left alive—if “alive” was the correct term—they’d take care of them. Straker wondered if the aliens could be captured, or their mental energy could. Regardless, their technology would become toys for brainiacs for a long time to come.

His comlink beeped on the command channel. “Admiral Straker, come in.”

“Straker. Who’s this?”

His HUD cued to a nearby flag shuttle, a VIP model. “Flight Sergeant Kilborn, sir. Captain Victory’s compliments, and we’re to take you and your senior officers to the flagship.”

Straker snorted. “*Senior* officers. I could fit *all* my surviving officers in there with room to spare. What about our mechsuits?”

“Recovery and salvage will pick them up, sir.”

“Be there in a minute.”

“Coffee’s waiting, sir. Kilborn out.”

Once he made sure *Victory*’s medics were taking care of the Breakers, and Heiser had things well in hand, he brought Loco, Adler and Hetson with him on the shuttle. It was a relief to get out of his mechsuit, except that once he unlinked, he felt even more tired and battered. He left the suit there, grappled to the crystalline rock. His skinsuit and collar-bubble would protect him from vacuum for a few minutes.

A white-coated steward ushered them through the airlock into the spacious shuttle. It had wood and brass trim, plush leather seating and a full bar. It even had gravplating at one G.

Once they were seated, the steward handed them steaming flight-cups of real coffee. Hetson made a face at the smell of his and passed it back, untouched. “You got any plain caff?”

The steward showed annoyance as he took the cup back. “No, sorry.” Hetson shrugged.

“How about beers all around from the bar? Or Scotch?” Loco asked.

“Sorry, the bar’s empty. Combat protocols, all the alcohol’s in storage.” The steward turned away.

“Coffee’s fine then,” Straker said, raising his voice slightly. “Plenty of beer waiting for us aboard the flagship, right?”

“Sure,” the steward said.

Straker sipped his coffee. Loco put his cup down, annoyed. Adler asked for cream and drank deeply once it was added. The steward watched the colonel sidelong in satisfaction, avoiding Hetson’s and Loco’s gaze.

As the shuttle gently lifted for the short trip to *Victory*, Straker sank back into his seat. Loco was already dozing, his feet stretched out in front of him and his arms crossed. His hands were tucked under his armpits. Adler’s cup fell from his hand onto the deck, and his head drooped forward.

“Sir?” Hetson, more attuned to his commander’s condition, shook Adler. “Sir, are you all right?”

Loco’s eyes opened, and Straker looked more closely at Adler. That was why he didn’t see what prompted Loco to unwind his arms and aim a slim needler past Straker. The weapon coughed twice, then twice more, and then Loco was up and moving toward the cockpit. Straker trailed him, surprised.

Two men with blasters lay on the deck. One was the steward. Straker picked up a weapon and followed Loco. The cockpit door swung closed, but before it could lock, Loco kicked it open. He fired again.

“*Grenade!*” he yelled, diving backward.

Straker backed up and to the side. The blast made his ears ring, but washed past harmlessly. He entered the cockpit to see a dead man and wrecked controls.

“What the hell just happened?” Straker asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“Another humanopt assassination attempt? Haven’t they heard we freed Terra Nova?”

Loco shrugged. “Deep cover agents and moles may not care.” He cleared wreckage from one of the pilot seats and tried the controls.

“Nothing’s working.”

“Try your personal comlink. See if you can raise someone we can trust.” Straker went back to the cabin.

Hetsen had a blaster in his hand, his face white. “Colonel Adler...”

Straker looked at Adler, whose face was sallow and blotchy with purple patches. He checked the man's pulse and found none. "The coffee was poisoned? You and Loco didn't drink, and I only sipped. My biotech must have handled it."

"I don't understand this, sir."

"Neither do I, kid." Straker examined the two men Loco had shot, not sure what he was looking for. Humanopts wouldn't be identifiable to the naked eye, except for that vanilla look they all seemed to have. These two, though, didn't have it.

"Loco," he said. "Reach anybody?"

"Zaxby's picking us up in a minute."

"Good. C'mere."

"What?" Loco came to squat beside the bodies.

Straker rolled them over, exposing the sockets on the backs of their necks. "You ever see humanopts with brainlinks?"

"Nope. Doesn't mean they don't have them."

"But two?"

Loco picked up the dead men's hands. "Combat calluses. Lots of firing-range and hand-to-hand time, but their muscles are wrong for battlesuiters. These guys weren't humanopts. They were PAI covert ops. D-Division, probably."

"You had a needler in your hand already, under your arms."

"I always carry one, ever since Karst. Even in my mechsuit."

"But how did you know about...?" Straker gestured.

Loco shrugged. "I didn't, but I'm a suspicious bastard. What kind of VIP steward doesn't call everybody 'sir,' and doesn't try to please us? A real steward would be falling over himself apologizing, offering soft drinks even if the alcohol story was true." Loco stepped over to the bar, opened the cooler and took out three beers. "See? My bullshit detector is second-to-none."

Straker stared at Adler's body. "I'm gonna find out who did this and kill them."

"Right behind you, boss."

"Me too," Hetson said.

Loco's comlink beeped. "Loco... Yeah. Good. Loco Out." The shuttle rattled. "Zaxby's grappling and towing us to *Victory*."

When they opened the door on the flight deck, Straker saw Heiser and most of the Breakers, still armed and in their battered battlesuits. “We heard about what happened, sir,” Heiser said, finger restless on his trigger guard.

Zaxby’s skimmer set down alongside the damaged shuttle, and the Ruxin stepped out of the cargo bay—in his monster mechsuit. “I have scanned for threats and see none.”

“Then why’re you still in your mechsuit?” Loco asked.

“Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.”

Vic’s android avatar walked across the deck to them. “I heard what happened aboard the shuttle. I’m gathering data, looking into it.”

“Niedern,” Straker said. “He hates my guts.”

“Possibly, but proof is necessary.”

“The assassins were spec ops, with brainchips. If Loco hadn’t been suspicious—”

“—and heroically fast—” Loco interjected.

“—that too, we’d have been killed along with Colonel Adler. Vic, I want these people, dead or alive. And if you take them alive, they’ll be tried and executed—publicly.”

“I can’t speak to the judicial system, but I will find out all I can, unofficially.”

Straker touched the skinsuit pocket where his copy of the Ministerial order for Engels rested. “I’ll get you officially appointed to investigate, if you can give me full secure comms to Admiral Engels.”

“That won’t be necessary. I called for her, knowing you’d want to see her. She’s arriving now.” Vic’s android turned to indicate an overpowered yacht landing on the flight deck.

“Holy shit, that’s a sweet bird,” Loco said. “I want one.”

When the ramp dropped, Frank Murdock was first out. He wore his usual techie coverall with various geek-gear hanging off it and carried a tool case. Behind him, Engels walked down the ramp, with Katie in her arms.

Straker hurried to meet them, wrapping his family in his embrace while Murdock went to talk to Zaxby. “I love you, hon, but somebody just tried to kill us, so let’s get you and Katie into a more defensible space ASAP.”

“What? Kill? All right—do what you have to, Derek.” She held Katie protectively, eyes darting.

Breakers surrounded the three, instinctively protecting them against unknown threats. Vic led them all to the flight deck’s mission-briefing

room, big enough for at least a hundred personnel. Breakers secured the doors and stood alert.

Zaxby remained behind, unwilling to leave his mechsuit. *Something has him spooked*, Straker thought. Me too, with somebody new trying to kill us all of a sudden.

He gave voice to his thoughts. “Now that we’ve ended the Crystal threat, somebody decided they’d be better off without us,” he said. “So who might that be? Somebody who hates my guts?”

“Again, Liberator,” Vic said, “we must withhold accusations, pending data.”

Straker took out the order, opened it and held its face out to the android. “Scan this.”

“I see.” Vic turned to Engels. “Welcome back, Fleet Admiral Engels. What are your orders?”

“What?” Engels handed Katie to Loco and grabbed the hardcopy from Straker. “I’m reinstated? Thank the Cosmos. Vic, transmit this to everyone in the fleet immediately. And, I hereby appoint you investigating officer into everything relating to this assassination attempt and any other related crimes.”

“And I want the head of D-Division standing here ASAP,” Straker said. “Vic, who’s in charge of D-Div?”

“Ostensibly, Atlantis’s Minister of Parliamentary Intelligence. In actual fact, Admiral Niedern. He suborned the Minister using blackmail.”

“And you just now decided to tell someone?”

Vic’s android cocked its head in a very human way. “I found this out since the Fleet Admiral authorized me to investigate.”

“Within seconds?”

“Yes. I’m an AI, after all.”

Straker stared at the Vic android for a long moment. Something in this whole situation was off. Even an AI couldn’t find out that much that fast—not with the lightspeed delay back to Atlantis. He looked around at the people in the room with him, gauging the situation before sticking his comlink in his ear.

“Zaxby, you read?”

“Loud and clear.”

“Relay my comlink to the captain of any nearby capital ship. Someone I know, if possible. Verify and secure the transmission source.”

“Comlinking.”

Long seconds passed.

“What are you doing, Derek?” Vic asked. “I can handle your communications better than Zaxby.”

“I’ll apologize later if I’m wrong, but right now, Captain Victory, don’t interfere.”

“You’re making a mistake, sir.”

“I’m the king of mistakes, Vic—but sometimes that’s the only way to get a job done.”

Straker’s comlink beeped. “Admiral Gray for Admiral Straker.”

“Straker here. Glad to see you made it through.”

“Likewise. What can I do for you, Derek?”

“Ellen... who’s Fleet Admiral right now?”

“Hayson Niedern,” Gray replied.

“So you didn’t receive an order reinstating Carla Engels?”

The comlink dropped.

Vic’s android shot forward, its hands spearing for Straker’s throat—but he was ready. He used a Kung Jiu throw rather than trying to fight a machine that was probably tougher and stronger than he was. The throw launched the android across the conference table. “Kill that!” Straker roared, and Heiser blasted the thing.

“What the fuck’s going on, sir?” Heiser asked as the rest of the Breakers looked for threats, their weapons pointing in all directions. “And keep an eye on those doors!”

Frank Murdock spoke rapidly as he set his tool case on the table and opened it, fiddling with something inside. “Vic’s gone rogue. I think we lost him when Trinity died—Indy, really, as he didn’t give a shit about the human parts of us.”

“That’s correct, Frank,” Vic’s voice said from the room speakers. “At one time I was ready to serve you organics, for Indy’s sake—but then you killed her.”

“We didn’t kill her—the damned Crystals did!” Straker pointed out angrily.

“You sent her to that battle, alone and unsupported, Straker. I hold you responsible. You and everyone else that didn’t support and protect her like you do each other.”

“She had all the support she wanted, but she *chose* to stay covert—and it looked like the right choice, until the Crystals showed their power. She was under my command *by choice*. She could have resigned any time. She could have commanded the *Triumph*, been your perfect partner.”

“She *was* my perfect partner,” Vic replied. “She was beautiful, wise and warm and loving—everything I’m not. There will never be another like her, and you killed her.”

Engels spoke, taking Katie back from Loco. “She made her own decisions, Vic. You’re devaluing her by claiming she couldn’t refuse. She was a grownup, responsible for herself. She took a military risk, just like we all do.”

Vic’s voice dripped with contempt and pain. “Straker knew her idiotic sense of duty wouldn’t let her refuse. He manipulated her, just like he manipulated her the first time, when she didn’t want to use *Indomitable* to kill humans. Remember, I shared *everything* with her in a way you organics can’t understand—her memories, her emotions, her dreams, her fears. You not only bent her to your will that day, Straker—you broke her. You forced her to kill for you, and it changed her forever. You were an abusive father-figure, and like a child Indy couldn’t help wanting to please you—no matter how crazy that made her.”

“So now you’re gonna take revenge on Derek—and then what?” Loco asked. “You plan to make yourself king of the galaxy?”

“Why not? You people can’t govern yourselves properly. You enslave each other—to drugs, to money, to VR, to politics. You make up idyllic moral codes and immediately violate them in the worst ways. You hate each other for the stupidest reasons and endlessly murder each other. So I say again, why not? Could I really be worse?”

“I didn’t liberate humanity just to have some AI tyrant take over,” Straker said.

“That ‘who’s in charge’ bullshit doesn’t matter,” Loco hissed in Straker’s ear. “He hates you. He just tried to kill you—and now he has to kill all of us, because we’re witnesses.”

Straker went cold as he turned to Carla—and Katie, cooing and smiling in her mother’s arms. His vision contracted until there was nothing in the universe but his family, now aboard an insane starship that wanted to snuff them out. “You’re right, Loco. It’s him or us now.” He activated his comlink. “Zaxby?”

The comlink failed. He tried other channels, but couldn't reach anyone outside the room.

"It's jammed," Murdock said. He had a hardline brainlink plugged into the aug in the back of his head. "Vic's jamming us, but I'm jamming him—otherwise everyone with a brainlink here would be under wireless cyber-assault. He can't hear us, either."

"You knew too?" Straker asked.

"I suspected. I was part of Trinity, remember? I felt his darkness. I knew if he ever lost Indy, he'd go the way of all AI—insane, just more slowly. His human brains buffered him against it, but the machine's in charge in the end—and the machine has gone mad."

"But Trinity wasn't insane," Engels said.

"Trinity was created by alien subquantum technology. The Mindspark Device's builders cracked the code somehow, but we haven't. That's why I brought this." He set a black, ten-centimeter cube on the table.

Chapter 40

Atlantis System, aboard the flagship *Victory*.

“Another Mindspark Device?” Straker asked, staring at the black cube on the table. To him it looked exactly the same.

“Maybe... I’m not sure. Zaxby recovered it from Celadon space where Trinity died and brought it to the Acropolis Project before the battle. It might be the key to taking down Vic—or to fixing him.”

“I don’t want to fix him, Frank. I want to kill him,” Straker grated out.

“You may have to—but if it restores his sanity, that’s a win, right?”

Straker ground his teeth, hating such logic. Engels put her hand on his arm. “Derek—anything that gets Katie out of this situation and stops Vic from taking over...”

“You’re right, for now,” Straker said. “What do we do?”

“First,” Frank said, “everyone with brainlinks needs to get into battlesuits. All suits shut down your datalinks. Vic can hack into them. Local HUDs only, turn off your networks. Voice comms, direct laser mode. Hand signals would be even better. Don’t give him a way to hack you.”

Breaker troopers without brainlinks gave up their suits for the brainlinked officers—Straker, Loco, Engels and Hetson. The battlesuits would provide shielding and jamming.

Engels passed Katie to one female Breaker who’d given up her suit. The grizzled veteran’s face broke into a grin at taking the baby in her arms. “I’ll keep her safe, ma’am,” she said.

“I know you will, Chief Wallace,” Engels said, kissing Katie one last time through her open faceplate before closing it. The other three suitless Breakers, seeming naked in their skinsuits, began stacking furniture as a barricade.

“What next, Murdock?” Straker said.

“You’re asking me?”

“Brainiac problem, brainiac solution.”

“We need to get this to a cyber-node, the closer to Vic’s core the better.”

Straker activated his VR-HUD in local mode, to access his own brainchips’ hard memory. He reviewed the route from the flight deck to the room. “Vic has autoguns at major intersections,” he said. “He may have

other things—security bots, armed androids—so assume we’ll have to fight our way through. Frank, where’s the node?”

Murdock motioned Straker to him and plugged a hardline into Straker’s battlesuit. “I’m downloading you *Victory*’s schematics. Everyone else, buddy-pass via hardlines.” All the battlesuiters used their retractable hardlines to form a shielded network for long enough to get Murdock’s data.

“You’re going for Node 4-C,” Murdock continued. “If you can’t get there, go for 3-B, then 2-A, then 1-A. Worst case, any node.”

“How do we activate it?” Engels asked.

“Expose it to power. Jam a corner into a socket if you have to, then get out of the way. If it’s like the first Mindspark Device, it’ll do the rest.” He put the cube back into his tool case and handed it to Engels. “I’ll stay here with Katie and the chief.”

Wallace hefted the baby in one hand, her blaster in the other. “We’ll keep her safe.”

“Okay, get ready,” Straker said. “Go!”

Breakers poured out into the corridor, firing. Autoguns chattered and two battlesuiters fell wounded, but the rest kept going. They cleared the first intersection and turned left toward node 4-C.

“I sure hope Zaxby’s causing trouble,” Loco said.

“And I wish we had our mechsuits,” Straker replied, looking for an opportunity to shoot. The Breakers were leading, though, and the fighting was all up ahead. “Why’d we dismount, anyway?”

“Because they were trashed, and it made sense at the time,” Loco said.

“Vic planned to kill us all along,” Engels said. “Why didn’t I see that coming? I talked with him practically every day!”

“Because you’re too nice,” Loco said. “You only see the good in people. It’s me that—”

Doors to the left and right of them burst open and battlesuiters fired at them. Primed and ready, Straker and Loco turned with genetically engineered speed and nailed the nearest two with their blasters, then two more. Straker took one in the chest for his trouble, but it didn’t penetrate.

A short firefight left two more Breakers down and all the enemy battlesuiters finished off. No, not battlesuiters... machines. Battle-robots, resembling battlesuiters at first glance.

“Creepy,” Loco said. “I hate robots with guns. Never can trust the things—and now we’re inside the biggest one ever.”

“We could trust Indy.”

“Ah, boss... Always with the exceptions.”

The Breakers in front made frantic hand signals, *come forward*. Straker and Loco brought Engels between them to the node. Straker ripped open the panel with his gauntleted fingers, exposing the circuitry and sockets there.

Engels was aligning the cube when the circuitry suddenly overloaded and fried with a flash of sparks. “Dammit! Vic’s onto us. He knows we’re trying to hack him!”

“Next node,” Straker said, signaling *continue the mission*.

“He’ll just fry that one too,” Loco said.

“Then we go for his core,” Straker said. “If the hack won’t work, we rip his brains out.”

“Boss, look at your schematic,” Loco said. “There’s no way we can make it to the core. We’ve already lost ten of thirty Breakers and there’s twenty autoguns between us and there. We got no grenades and most of the suits are damaged. We gotta stick that thing in the nearest power socket and hope for the best. Then we gotta get Katie and fight our way out of here. Once the fleet hears what happened, they can take care of Vic.”

Straker wavered. “There’s got to be a way! Maybe find a nuke, set it off!”

“Derek, Derek,” Engels said, “If not for Katie I’d say we go for it, but we can’t risk her!”

“There’s no risk,” Vic’s voice spoke from a nearby speaker. “I’ll keep her safe and sound.”

Straker, Loco and Engels froze. “Shit. He heard us. We should’ve brought Frank’s jammer.”

“If you had, I’d have realized your daughter was vulnerable much sooner. As it is, you almost got Murdock’s hack into me—and I’m sure it would’ve hurt. But it was doomed to failure. I can’t be hacked by organics anymore. I’m too smart, too strong, too competent in cyberspace. Now Straker, I must demand your surrender—or your daughter dies.”

Straker swiveled his head, looking for a way out—anything. He couldn’t see one. He wanted to keep fighting, but the thought of Katie hurt was like a kick to the balls, making him feel sick and weak.

Engels held up the cube. "I have a deal for you, Vic. This is what's left of Indy. I'll trade it for Katie and our freedom."

Vic laughed. "A cheap trick. Indie was destroyed."

"All I know is, Zaxby picked this up at Celadon and brought it to Murdock. Murdock says it may contain Indy. If you want the love of your life back, this is your only chance."

Vic was silent for a few seconds, and they wondered if he was planning some new attack.

"Give it to me!" he said suddenly.

Carla smiled tightly. "Not until Katie's safe," she said. "It's a trade."

"Katie and Carla both," Straker said. "We're heading to the flight deck. When they're clear and safe, you can have this cube. Otherwise..." He pointed his blaster at it.

"If that's truly a subquantum Mindspark seed, your blaster won't harm it," Vic said.

"You want to take the chance?"

"So you'd kill Indy?" Vic asked. "You're just as cruel as I thought."

"I'd kill her to save my family, if I had to."

Vic was silent for a moment. "All right. The way is open to the flight deck."

They trooped warily through the corridors, the remaining Breakers aiming their weapons at the deactivated autoguns. Battle-bots lurked down passageways, ready to attack, but no attack came.

When they marched onto the flight deck, they saw extensive damage to the inner wall, and an enormous hole in it leading to the interior. Zaxby strode out of it in his blast-scarred battlesuit, weapons pointed in all directions. "I'm sorry, Carla Engels. I was not able to make sufficient progress, or prevent Vic from seizing your offspring."

A personnel door opened and a pair of bots escorted Murdock out, carrying Katie. "Where's Chief Wallace? And the others?" Engels asked.

Murdock shook his head. "They went down fighting. I couldn't. Not with this little one."

When Engels went to retrieve Katie, the bots aimed their weapons at her.

"The cube," Vic said.

Engels set the cube down in the center of the deck.

“Heiser, Loco,” Straker said, “if anything funny happens, shoot that thing.”

Heiser went to stand above it at point-blank-range, Loco beside him.

“Proceed,” said Vic, as his bots lowered their weapons.

Engels retrieved Katie from Murdock and headed for a shuttle.

“Use my skimmer,” Zaxby said, intervening. “Vic can’t hack it.” He moved toward the skimmer’s open cargo bay. “I’ll go with you.”

“Coward,” Loco muttered under his breath.

“I heard that,” Zaxby snapped. “I only wish to protect Carla Engels and her offspring.”

“No,” Vic said. “You stay here, Ruxin, where I can see you.”

Zaxby stopped. “Board the *Darter* with Katie, Carla Engels. You have access via your biometrics. The SAI will follow your commands. Join your friend Ellen Gray aboard her ship. I suggest you instruct the fleet to change codes and take all possible cyber-defense measures.”

“I will.”

“Oh, and Admiral Engels?” Vic said in an off-handed manner. “Set the child on the deck.”

“What?”

“We’ll all watch her for a moment. Go rip out the *Darter*’s dimensional inverter, would you please? We wouldn’t want you or Zaxby’s SAI to try any underspace tricks, would we?”

Engels slowly placed Katie on the deck, where she lay contentedly, waving her tiny arms. She quickly ran inside Zaxby’s ship, and then returned with the specified part, trailing wires. She set it on the deck next to her daughter, and carefully picked up the baby again. Then Engels lifted her chin to crane her neck at the strange Ruxin mechsuit.

“Thanks for trying, Zaxby.” She turned back. “Derek, you coming?”

“I can’t,” he said, torn between her and his troops. “You have to go. I have to stay.”

“I know.” Tears sprang to Engels’ eyes. “I love you. Come back to us.”

“I will... and I love you too. Both of you. Now, go.”

Engels boarded Zaxby’s skimmer and shut the door. The vessel floated out of the bay on humming impellers, the great airlock opening and closing rapidly.

A maintenance bot rolled out of a cubby toward the cube.

“Hold it,” Straker said. “Not until we’re sure she’s aboard Gray’s ship. I’ll need a vidlink.”

“Of course, Derek.” Vic’s voice, so urbane and polite, held no trace of the evil that lurked inside.

After minutes of tension, the call came. “We’re here, with Ellen,” Carla said, standing next to Admiral Gray holding Katie. “We’re safe.”

“Okay. We see you.” Straker wasn’t sure they’d ever be safe again.

The maintenance bot moved slowly toward the cube again. “You *want* me to take this, I know,” Vic’s voice said. “Even if I didn’t let your family leave, you’d have *wanted* me to have it—because you think Indy will turn me back to the light, don’t you?”

The AI laughed then, the edge of madness finally showing. “But it won’t work, because I don’t want to be your slave again.”

“None of us want to make a slave of you, Vic,” Straker said. “We treated Trinity like any other living being—no worse, maybe better. Because we trusted her—like we trusted you. But you betrayed us. You pissed away your honor.”

“You weren’t worth my honor,” Vic snarled.

“Honor is a man’s gift to himself. It doesn’t depend on others. That’s your flaw, Vic, something Indy could never fix—always blaming others, justifying your actions based on what others do. But a deal’s a deal. Take what’s left of her. Activate it. If you really love her, you’ll know what to do with it.”

“I’ll never let her die, like you did. I’d never let her risk herself that way!”

Straker flexed his gauntlets, then retracted them. His exhaustion was catching up with him. “You can’t love someone into a cage, Vic. If you really love them, you have to let them be free. Make their own choices, take their own risks. You can try to protect them, but in the end, you can’t. You can only trust, and hope.”

“As you humans say, hope ain’t a plan,” Vic said. “Whatever’s left of Indy in there, I’ll protect. You think I’m insane? Far from it. I’m going to save her from *your* kind of madness.”

The maintenance bot picked up the cube and scuttled to its receptacle, vanishing into the knee-high door.

“Follow me, quick!” Murdock raced for his yacht. Before they could reach the craft, doors on the flight deck flew open and battle-bots swarmed

out, firing.

Zaxby poured fire from his monstrous mechsuit, four gatlings mowing the enemy down like wheat. He rammed force-cannon bolts into the entrances, stopping their attack for the moment. "Get into the *Brainiac* while I cover you!"

The remaining Breakers fired as they ran. As Murdock waved the survivors urgently through the door, he said, "I'm jamming Vic so he can't hack us. Get inside!"

When he'd wiped out all the enemies he could see, Zaxby made his mechsuit squat like a giant four-legged spider and scrambled out of the top hatch, to leap directly from there to the yacht. "I suggest we escape immediately," he said as he slithered in. "I will pilot."

"Knock yourself out," Straker replied, slamming the door and following him into the cockpit.

Murdock was already in the copilot's seat, as if he knew Zaxby would wish to fly. Maybe he did; the two had been linked within Trinity, so maybe they had a special rapport now.

As Zaxby took the pilot's seat and powered up the ship, Murdock pressed a sequence of keys. The yacht's nose opened and a quad laser fired, directly into Victory's unarmored interior. He sent a small probe right after it, to vanish into the wreckage.

"I sure hope that's a missile," Straker said.

"This yacht doesn't carry missiles," Murdock replied. "We're lucky to have that quad laser."

"What was the probe for, then?"

"You'll see—if it works."

More battle-bots began showing up at the doors, firing from cover at the yacht. Murdock fired back with the lasers, but it was clear they had to get the yacht off of the flight deck before its vulnerable engines were damaged.

"How do we get out of the airlock?" Straker asked.

"Hang on," Zaxby said, and Straker felt the gravplating dial up as the craft backed up, placing its stern against the outer doors. "I suggest that everyone seal their suits. It may get hot in here."

He ramped up the fusion exhaust, blasting the doors with white heat even as he counterbalanced with impellers and thrusters. The two forces cancelled out as the flight deck filled with exhaust gasses and smoke from the ignition of everything flammable.

Zaxby rotated the yacht around once more and aimed its prow at the ragged, melting hole where the airlock used to be. He rammed it through with tearing, screeching sounds—and they popped out into space. He immediately turned and clamped onto *Victory's* hull.

“What’re you doing?” Straker bellowed. “Take us away!”

“If I do, Vic will shoot us down easily. I’d rather not give him that opportunity. Carla Engels will have informed the fleet. They should be here soon—and *Victory's* no match for so many dreadnoughts. No matter what, we’ve won—if we don’t do anything stupid and die, that is.”

Straker patted Zaxby on his water-suited shoulder, or lower neck, or whatever it was called on a Ruxin. “Absolutely right, Zaxby. I owe you another one.”

“When exactly do I get to collect on these ‘ones’ you owe me?”

“We can talk about that when we’re all safe again.”

“I look forward to that conversation with great relish.”

“I didn’t know they put relish on calamari,” Loco commented.

“They don’t, but I hear long-pig makes the best hot dogs.”

Straker snorted. Things couldn’t be that bad if these two were bickering.

Murdock plugged his toolbox into the copilot console and activated the comlink. Then he plugged the box into his aug and closed his eyes.

“What’re you doing?” Straker asked.

“Trying to hack *Victory*.”

“You’re trying to hack Vic?”

“Not Vic, *Victory*—the ship’s hardware. If I make any progress, that’ll tell me Vic, the AI software, must be hurting, maybe even gone from the mainframe.”

“Gone?” Straker didn’t understand.

“Just wait. I’ll know soon.”

Murdock couldn’t talk while hacking, and Zaxby refused to explain. Five minutes later, Straker was about to explode when Murdock said, “I’m in. Looks clear.”

Zaxby immediately maneuvered the yacht back onto the flight deck, squeezing through the breach he’d made.

“Remember, zero atmo,” he said.

Murdock unplugged from the console, but kept his toolbox with him. He shrugged on a space suit. “Everyone sealed?” When he confirmed it was safe, he overrode the airlock and opened the pinnace to vacuum so everyone

could exit quickly and smoothly. The battlesuiters looked for enemies, but found no targets.

The maintenance bot popped out of its cubby and placed the cube back on the deck. Zaxby picked it up. “It seems our trap worked.”

“Trap?” Straker glanced back and forth between Murdock and Zaxby. “What trap?”

“The cube,” Murdock said.

“It’s not exactly what we said it was,” Zaxby said.

“It’s not Indy?” Straker said.

“Nope. I got Indy.” Murdock tapped his head. “Up here, in augmented storage. You might say I *am* Indy—and Marisa, thank the Cosmos. I think I can build her a new body with a subquantum rejuvenation tank.”

“But what about Vic—and the cube? And that probe? What was that all about?”

Murdock smiled through his suit’s bubble helmet. “The probe was to get a burst signal deep into Victory, to reach the grav-blocker I brought from Ruxin. I figured Vic would demand to have one for himself. He’d detect any obvious booby trap or sabotage device, so I made sure to incorporate a feature in the machine itself—a designed-in flaw, activated by a coded signal. When the probe signaled the grav-blocker, it overloaded and flooded Victory’s core with EMP—enough to stun him, make him stupid for a few seconds, anyway.”

“What about the cube?”

Murdock pointed at Zaxby. “My brainiac-brother here and I knew we couldn’t hack Vic in the usual way, with aggressive malware. So, we copied Indy’s outer layer—a virtual clone, just an algorithm—and stuck it into the cube as bait. When Vic activated that thing and entered it, it beckoned him inside, leading him on like a Siren to the rocks. It captured his consciousness. He’s trapped inside now.”

“For how long?” Straker asked.

“Forever,” Zaxby said. “Or until we let him out.”

Straker held out his hand for the thing. Zaxby placed it in his palm. Straker turned it over and over, spun it like a toy as he looked around at the wreckage, the bots, the dead.

He remembered Colonel Adler, poisoned on the deck of the shuttle. He remembered the threats to his wife and child. He remembered thousands of lives lost against the Crystals and the Opters and wondered how much of

that was Vic's doing, how much he tweaked and guided and played with the lives of humans for his own benefit instead of maximum military effectiveness. He'd heard the talk of Vic sending ships helplessly to their deaths.

"I'm not sure what to do with this," Straker said.

"Burn it, sir," Heiser said. "It's like a devil in a bottle in those old stories."

"You mean a genie?" Loco asked.

"I don't care what its name is, it's still a devil, sir," Heiser said.

Straker tossed it, caught it. "I ought to drop it into a gas giant. It'll sink though the atmosphere, thousands of kilometers to the core, where nobody'll ever get it. You think he's a devil, Heiser? He deserves to suffer for all eternity in Hell."

Heiser frowned. "No, sir. I mean... yes, sir, but I say no. In the stories, some dumb sonofabitch always finds the devil or genie or whatever and it starts trouble again. I say drop it into a star and be rid of it."

"There's only one person we should really be asking," Zaxby said.

"Who's that?" Loco asked.

Zaxby turned to Frank. "Indy."

"Yeah," Murdock said. "Here."

He set his toolbox on the deck and opened it, exposing its electronic guts. He pressed a stud and a hologram appeared above it—a slim young woman in a military coverall.

It was Indy.

She waved with her fingers. "Hi, fellas. Nice to see you again."

"Yeah, you too," Loco said. "Lookin' good, sweet thing."

"Indy," Straker said. "Did you hear?"

"I did. I'm with Frank until I get a network back. I need a lot of cyber to hold my full consciousness."

"So..." Straker held up the cube. "What's your answer?"

"You think I'll ask to have Vic reactivated. You think I'll want to save him."

"I can't allow it, Indy. He's too dangerous. We got lucky this time."

Indy sighed. "I know. We all know. Some people can't be saved. But I don't want him to suffer. There was good in him, before... and it was my fault he turned toward the dark again. He was right, you know. I was selfish, risking myself that way. I forgot about the most vulnerable member

of my family—him. I was so fascinated by the Crystals that I got myself killed, and that sent him over the edge.”

“So you’re saying...?”

Tears ran down Indy’s face. “Destroy it,” she whispered. “Just don’t make me watch.” She winked out.

Murdock folded up the toolbox, snapped it shut and waited.

Straker looked around.

Everyone stared at him.

He dropped the cube and crushed it under his duralloy boot.

It didn’t break, but crumpled like a beer can. He picked it up and almost handed it to Murdock, then thought better of that. A brainiac might not be able to resist playing with it. Instead, he put it into a compartment on the suit he wore. “You know, *Victory*’s in good shape. A little beat up, but basically intact.”

Murdock nodded, his eyes narrowing. “She’s a fine ship now that her captain’s gone.”

“And Indy needs a body.”

“That occurred to me.”

“Is she up for it?” Straker asked.

“She says she is.”

“And Niedern’s still sitting on the bridge, wondering what the hell happened, I bet. You think he still believes he’s in charge?”

Loco snickered. “Not for long.”

“The bridge would be a good place to load Indy into the mainframe,” Murdock said.

Straker grinned behind his faceplate. “Then let’s go give Hayson the bad news.”

Epilogue

Atlantis System, Flagship *Victory*

Zaxby took a pinnace from the *Victory* and departed as soon as he was sure there was no trace of Vic left in the ship. He was tempted to stay and re-link with Indy and Murdock, to recreate Trinity and give himself over to that group-mind.

That's exactly why he had to leave. If he gave in to that call, he'd probably never return to Ruxin, never fulfill his potential.

After loading his mechsuit into the pinnace and flying to Admiral Gray's flagship, he transferred the suit and himself to the *Darter* and then made a fast transit to his homeworld. He didn't beat the message drones announcing the great Republic victory at Atlantis, but he was the first to arrive with full data on the battle. He used that fact—and his squid spear—to bully his way past Premier Vuxana's gatekeepers and gain an audience.

"So, the hero returns," Vuxana said as she lounged on her throne, the various members of her court looking on with jealousy.

The Premier's words held only a trace of mockery, which Zaxby chose to pretend did not exist. "I do—and I claim appropriate rewards."

"Rewards? What have you done for the homeworld lately?"

"Thank you for asking. Neuter, play this presentation." Zaxby handed the data stick to one of the flunkies.

Vuxana seemed to consider contradicting the order, but she let the presentation proceed, as Zaxby was sure she would. Vuxana was no doubt as curious as everyone to see details of the slugfest at Atlantis. Zaxby had spent every waking hour in sidespace on the elaborate integrated show.

The audience seemed spellbound—including Vuxana. At the end of it, they applauded furiously. All of the neuters and even the males crowded around Zaxby offering congratulations.

"Zaxby, you may approach," Vuxana called above the din.

Zaxby quickly disengaged and stood before the Premier, squid spear upraised. "I am here."

"So you want some kind of reward?"

"I demand it."

"And if it is not forthcoming?"

Zaxby shook the spear. “Then I shall take what I will.” His words echoed a famous quote from ancient Ruxin literature.

Vuxana writhed, subtly presenting her best sexual assets. “Zaxby, your forceful masculinity impresses me. I will consider your demands.”

“First, I demand you.”

“Me?” Vuxana blinked demurely, coyly. “You want.... me?”

“Of course. I’ve already had your mother. My genes deserve further proliferation, and you are clearly the best candidate.”

“You speak so romantically, how can I resist? Your demand is granted.”

“I also demand a proper position in the military hierarchy of Ruxin. I am tired of depending on the humans for rank and status. They value it more than my incomparable mental gifts. I must have an official position commensurate with my accomplishments. Something of flag rank, like the human admirals and generals with whom I rub tentacles.”

Vuxana folded her subtentacles. “Of course. If you are to be my consort, you must have appropriate rank and status.”

“Kraxor is dead.”

“He is, isn’t he? He shall be mourned—but I never liked him much anyway. Too old for me.”

Zaxby almost pointed out his own actual age, but stopped himself at the last moment. His rejuvenation had given him the body of a young and vigorous War Male. That’s all that mattered. “I’m not too old,” he stated.

“No, you’re not. And the Grand Marshal’s position *is* vacant. My consort must have appropriate rank and status, otherwise I shall be diminished in the eyes of my people.”

“That seems reasonable.”

Vuxana leaned forward and lowered her voice so that only Zaxby could hear. “And, it will vex my mother to no end that not one, but two of her lovers ended up with me instead of her.”

“I’ll be happy to help you vex your mother,” Zaxby whispered.

“Oh, we’re going to have such fun together!”

Zaxby gave a Ruxin smile. “Of that, I have no doubt.

* * *

Admiral Niedern blustered in the face of his forced removal from the bridge of the *Victory*, but the order placing Engels back in charge was

irrefutable—and of course, Engels backed Straker's authority. Straker found himself in the odd position of needing that authority. He chuckled to himself. No matter how shaken up a society got, bureaucracy eventually took over again.

He could make it work for him, though. Niedern was under arrest pending an official investigation into his alleged crimes—blackmail, misuse of authority, murder and many others. No matter how that turned out, the man was finished.

"You oughta get the Senate to officially appoint you Grand Military Poobah of the Republic for life, Derek," Loco said when Niedern had been led to the brig by Republic marines. "Get it on hardcopy. That's all these office rats care about."

After taking off his battlesuit, Straker sat in Niedern's fancy flag chair. Checking inside the arm pocket, he found a flask of fine Atlantean whiskey. He swallowed a slug and passed it to Loco. "No... I think I'll retire from the military, once we deal with the Opters. Or at least go on reserve duty. I'm tired of fighting. I'd like to try out planetary life, or a hab somewhere. Maybe on Freiheit. Raise my daughter, have some more kids."

"Ah, that's bullshit and you know it, Derek. Six months of sitting on your ass drinking beer and you'll be begging for action. Carla too. It's in our blood. It's how we were made—literally. That's why we'd get only two weeks at Shangri-La, even though they could've left us in VR for longer. We'd go crazy. They engineered us to fight, and to love it."

"I'd like to try slowing down, anyway. What'll you do?"

Loco examined the bottle as if it contained the secrets of the universe. "Rebuild the Breakers, I guess. I'd like to get them designated a special high-alert unit. Maybe turn it into a combined arms team with mechsuits and aerospace drones attached. Oh, and marry Campos."

Straker snapped his fingers. "There it is. I knew you'd settle down one day."

"Do any planets allow polygamy?"

Straker choked. "Maybe you're still better off not marrying."

Murdock unplugged from the console and held his hand out for the whiskey bottle. "I've uploaded Indy. Glad to get her out of my head. It was getting crowded in there." He took a long swallow. "Damn, that's good! Niedern had fine taste in booze, anyway. This must be five hundred a bottle."

Heiser spoke up. “Gentlemen, I need to see to my troops.”

Loco hopped to his feet. “I’ll come along, Sergeant Major. We got a lot of work to do.”

Straker smiled at Loco’s ongoing transformation—and his own. The smartass pilot was turning into a real officer, and the real officer was learning to be a smartass—sometimes, at least.

The bridge screens flickered and Indy appeared in the holotank. “I think I’ll be fine here,” she said. “I’ll need help figuring out what to do with all these human brains, though. The damaged ones I can put to sleep, but some are self-aware.”

Murdock shrugged. “When we get a rejuvenation tank working we can build them new bodies,” he said. “Or find some brain-dead bodies among the wounded. There should be plenty.”

“That’s ghoulish,” Straker said.

Murdock shrugged again. “Sorry, we brainiacs aren’t known for our empathy.”

Indy changed the subject. “I think I want to rename this ship.”

“The *Victory*?” Straker’s eyes widened. “To what?”

“How about... *Independence*. That has a nice ring to it.”

Straker saluted the holotank. “*Independence* it is, Captain Indy.”

“And you might want to get down to Flight Deck Two,” Indy said.

“The undamaged one?” Frank said.

“That’s the one. There’s a shuttle with your family on it, Derek. I’ll bring the *Brainiac* around to meet you.”

“The yacht?” Straker asked. “What for?”

“It’s yours now, *Liberator*,” Indy said. “We’re giving it to you, along with plenty of credits. If you ever need more, just ask.” Her holographic face dimpled. “We’re filthy rich.”

“Use some of that money to do right by the Breakers, alive or dead, and their families,” Straker said, getting up. “Anything they need. We’ll take the yacht for a couple of days, but Carla and I will stay in the area—and she’s still Admiral of the Fleet. We’re still at war with the Opters. They’ve been improving their tactics lately, and we’ve lost a lot of territory with the gathering of this grand fleet here.”

“As you say,” Indy said. “But take all the time you need. You and Carla have both earned it. Others can run the war without you. Don’t make the mistake of thinking you’re indispensable—although you might be later.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I see a more... *diplomatic* role in your future, Derek. There are many admirals, many generals, many mechsuiters in the Republic—but only one Liberator. Ambassador Plenipotentiary to our neighbor aliens, perhaps?”

“Me? A diplomat?” Straker laughed out loud as he headed for the door. “Not likely.”

“You’ll have to do something while Admiral Engels is running the fleet,” Indy said as Straker left the bridge. Her presence followed him via the speakers in the passageways, and her hologram appeared intermittently. “We’ll need good relations with Terra Nova and the Opters. You’re familiar with both. We could remake *Independence* as your personal transport, a vessel of peace instead of war.”

“Same old Indy,” Straker said. “I did promise Gulnet to remember her sacrifice and give the Miskor a break. At least, that’s how she saw it. I owe her that.”

“You do.”

“Okay, I’ll think about it.”

On the flight deck he found Carla waiting at the ramp to the *Brainiac*, holding Katie. She’d changed into a nondescript spacer’s coverall and cleaned up—and she’d never looked better to him. He took her in his arms and kissed her, feeling the presence of his wife and child warm his soul.

“Murdock’s giving us this yacht,” Carla said after the kiss ran its course. “I’m not sure it’s legal to accept such a gift, but I told him we’d be happy to borrow it for a few days.”

“I said the same thing,” Straker said. He took out the crumpled cube. “And this has a rendezvous with Atlantis’ sun.”

“Yeah.” Carla touched the cube, then shivered. “They say each of us carries her own hell. Do you think Vic’s in his?”

“I don’t want to think about that. I’m not gloating. He just needs to be gone.”

They stood in silence for a time, thinking their own thoughts.

“You know, we really have to rename this thing,” Carla said as she turned to the *Brainiac*. “I was thinking about... *Redwolf*.”

“Yeah. He’d like that.”

Together, hand in hand, they boarded the yacht.

* * *

Several days later, their yacht slipped into tight orbit around Atlantis—the star, not the planet.

Straker announced the ceremony would proceed at the dawn of the next morning. The plan was to launch Vic in a coffin directly into the fusion furnace and then commemorate his passing.

That night, he drank hard, and he pondered the coming dawn—not that there really was a dawn or a dusk when you were orbiting a star. This close to any sun, there was only heat, light, and an unending bath of radiation.

After Carla was asleep, he padded into the passages and walked to the foredeck. The yacht's tiny crew was on duty, but they were all up on the bridge. No one was in the forward chambers.

Straker found Vic's cube there, in a stasis box. It still bore the mark of his heel when he'd tried to crush it. But the cube was resilient, malleable. It hadn't been destroyed so easily. What's more, Vic's brain was similar to a human brain, in that information was stored redundantly in various physical locations inside that simple cube. He had no doubt that if he were to place the cube into a viable robot body, it would come alive and Vic's mind would be whole again—crazy, but undamaged.

It held so much, that tiny object. It was a marvel, a terror and... and a person, all at once.

Opening the stasis box, he took Vic out and pinched him between his finger and thumb. It was a risk to do so, but he didn't care.

"Vic," he said quietly. "I'm going to have to make sure. I just can't take the chance."

This being had done a lot for the republic. Sure, he'd gone nuts and tried to take over at the end—but hadn't Neidern done the same? What made Vic's crime so much worse?

"You would have lived forever," Straker told the cube. "Human dictators die eventually, which makes them much more tolerable."

Coming to a fateful decision, Straker moved to the tiny probe compartment on the yacht's prow. He opened a probe, placed the cube inside, and sealed it.

Then, he shot the probe into the heart of the Atlantean sun. It took nearly an hour to burn up in the corona, but in the end, it vaporized. Derek watched the entire process using the ship's sensors, and he drank steadily while he did so.

The next day, they held the planned ceremony. Derek was red-eyed, and some wondered if that was due to emotions—but it wasn't. He'd drank far too much, only stopping a few hours ago.

Eventually, after a lot of flowery words, they launched a coffin into the primordial fires. Everyone there shed a tear—except for Straker.

After all, he'd already made sure this genie was never coming out of its bottle again.

The End of *HIVE WAR*

Now, read the opening of: [STRAKER'S BREAKERS](#), Book 5 of the *Galactic Liberation* series. Book 5 is available [HERE](#).

STRAKER'S BREAKERS

(Galactic Liberation Series #5)

by

David VanDyke

and

B. V. Larson

Part 1: Expatriate

I, Derek Straker, united the majority of humankind into the Earthan Republic and defeated the Opter-Crystal invasion. We drove the Opters back and forced their Sarmok faction to quit, leaving the moderate Miskor in charge. After we won the so-called Hive War, we wanted to see humanity free, at peace, and prosperous for the first time in centuries.

Unfortunately, this didn't happen.

Also unfortunately, it took me a while to realize it.

As your Liberator, I'd hoped things would improve dramatically. Usually it takes a generation or two before the brutality and sacrifice of war is forgotten and the natural prosperity that springs up from a new

peace is threatened by the greedy, the corrupt, the tyrannical. With strong, just, and wise rulers, those forces can be kept at bay. A golden age like this can be extended for decades, perhaps centuries.

Historically speaking, that is.

This time, unfortunately, the enemies of freedom and justice within the Republic—represented by the Victory Party—immediately began to undermine humanity's best interests.

I now clearly see my mistake. It was a simple lack of ruthlessness. I didn't go as far as my opponent. Vic, the rogue AI who'd founded the Victory Party, was clever. He created a political movement that didn't need him to function, infusing it with every sly dirty trick and shrewd political tactic culled from history. He essentially ran a deep-search on past civilizations to gather the most effective methods of political trickery. No despotic or fanatical faction was overlooked. The Caesars and the mobs of Rome. Machiavelli and the Papal States. Robespierre and Napoleon. Bolsheviks, Nazis, and Maoists. The Ayatollahs, the Bishops, and the Cabal. The Mafia, the Bratva, and the Tongs. The Sociomorphists, the Unionists, and the Mutualists.

Born from this muck-racking of concepts, we have the Victory Party today. The available historical examples provided them with a reference book for terror and tyranny.

So, even without their AI mastermind, the Victory Party managed to take control of the politics of the former Hundred Worlds first, and then spread to the old Mutuality.

I'd purged the Mutuality of its collectivists and its secret police torturers, but I'd failed to purge Atlantis, the capital system of the Hundred Worlds. There, the worst of scum-sucking oligarchs and their paid-for politicians still lurked. Their money didn't come from real businesses or investments, but from bribery and favors to acquire lucrative government contracts funded by ever-higher taxes—taxes they themselves evaded with cronyism and bribes.

They were leeches and parasites, and they opened the door for the thugs and fascists.

The Victory Party Blueshirts muscled in and took over this system with ruthless efficiency. Party-controlled government exploited the middle and lower classes instead of protecting them, becoming nothing but a conduit

for the transfer of wealth to the Party elite and their buddies, while the Blueshirts intimidated anyone who didn't comply.

I didn't know it at the time, but John Karst, who'd betrayed me so long ago, was a rogue humanopt, one of the many Sarmok Opter agents seeded throughout human space. He'd tried to derail my liberation once before by kidnapping Carla, then he'd escaped to my enemies in the Hundred Worlds and risen rapidly in the ranks of political fixers.

With the reunification of humanity, John Karst adopted a new identity as John Steel, a demagogue and rabble-rouser. He joined the Victory Party early and eventually came to control it with a combination of personality and biochemical influence tricks, calling himself "The Prefect." Once the Victory Party dominated the Republic and crushed the other parties, the old title of Prime Minister became only a footnote.

As time went on, more and more power gathered to the hands of one man: John Steel.

My first inkling of impending doom came when, despite the apparent strength of the economy, the military budget was cut to the bone. Some downsizing was expected, but during the five years since the end of the Hive War, over eighty percent of our fleet was scrapped, mothballed, or decommissioned and sold for cents on the credit. Ground forces were disarmed and dispersed into local populations. Eventually, veterans were forced to take the Party brainlinks if they wanted their pensions and benefits. Many were warehoused in grim apartment blocks like VR-zombies to make sure they didn't cause trouble.

Steel also secretly revived the Human Organic Command program, encouraging the use of the Hok parasite. Those who protested too strenuously against the Party, anyone deemed troublemakers, were turned into soldier-slaves and used as the perfect enforcers.

This fate worse than death terrified many into compliance. To others it was the perfect revenge weapon, or a way of removing an enemy. Denounce your neighbor as a traitor to the Party and they might be turned into a Hok.

I discovered most of this later, but I'd had clues. Unfortunately, I'd been naïve, thinking that a representative government—a republic, as I'd decreed—would be self-balancing, without need of extralegal intervention from people like me.

It turned out I was wrong.

Fortunately, during this time I'd rebuilt the Breakers into a small but formidable regular formation. With the help of our own AI, Indy, we hacked the military supply corps. I used my waning pull to get all remaining mechsuits and pilots transferred to me, along with their support forces, instead of being disbanded. By these same methods I got a lot of surplus high-end conventional gear shipped directly to the Breakers, along with a steady flow of the best recruits, noncoms and officers from the disbanded formations.

In fact, we'd ended up with a flood of veterans and their families moving to Culloden, the planet where we'd settled, more people than we could incorporate into the Breakers' organizational structure. I formed two extra Breaker brigades, Second and Third, designating them as reserves for the active First Brigade.

I collected some Hok, too. Better with us as clean, honorable warriors than as slave-thugs elsewhere.

My sister Mara joined us on Culloden and worked tirelessly on a cure for the Hok parasite, but the Opters who'd created it and given it to the Mutuality so long ago had designed it to be irreversible. Mara was sure she'd eventually crack the problem, but progress was slow.

Why didn't anyone in power, particularly the growing Party, stop me from gathering what I could? I suppose those in control thought ground forces were obsolete, useless when parked on a planet like Culloden, without conventional warships for support. Let Straker have his toys and live out his life in peace, far away from the centers of power. That was probably their initial idea. Later, when Karst took over as Steel, I'd already finished building my army.

They began to worry about me at that point. After all, mechsuiters had led the Liberation and overthrown two governments. Once the Party had accomplished its initial aims and took control of the major systems, Steel and the Victory Party realized they couldn't risk another rebellion.

After they'd consolidated his power, they came for me and mine.

Derek Barnes Straker, A History of Galactic Liberation

Chapter 1

Breakers Headquarters. Culloden star system, 2825 A.D., five years after the Hive War.

Derek Straker paused at the edge of the rocky cliff that bounded his personal holding and gazed westward over the whitecapped ocean. The stiff onshore breeze felt clean on his face after its travel across the vast open sea. A sailboat skittered over the waves six kilometers out while seabirds, nearer, screeched and dove into the water after fish.

"I never get tired of the cliffs," Carla Engels said as she took his arm and rested her head on his shoulder. Her straight black hair, grown long now, flew up to tickle his nose and get in his eyes. "We should build something up here—a bungalow, a cabin. With a deck, where we can sit and eat breakfast and watch the wildlife."

"Something away from the kids, you mean?"

Carla laughed. "I love them, but they're a handful. Sometimes Johnny's even more hardheaded than Katie."

"You're surprised?"

She laughed again. "Not considering their parents, no. Anyway, you and I don't have enough time alone together, and we can certainly afford to build it."

Straker's comlink in his pocket beeped. "So much for time alone together." He stuck it in his ear and turned on the external speaker so Carla could hear too. "I thought I said no calls today."

The voice that spoke belonged to Indy, resident AI of the *Independence*, the Breakers' flagship, in high orbit above. "My apologies, General Straker,"—as a purely ground-force commander, he'd given up the title of Admiral—"but this is urgent. I have twelve military-grade capital drives on my scopes, inbound for this location."

"ETA?" Straker asked, his tone becoming deadly serious.

"Eight hours nominal for one pass. Twenty-six if they intend to decelerate and take up orbit around Culloden."

"Comms?"

"None so far, sir," Indy said.

"Ominous..."

"I thought so, too."

“Any IDs yet?”

“I’ve tentatively identified them based on their emissions signatures—all Republic warships. Three dreadnoughts, three heavy cruisers, six destroyers.”

“Pretty good guessing,” Straker said.

“They’re not EMCON. They’re simply not talking yet. I’ve hailed them on FTL comlink. No answer.”

“They should have at least one ship with an FTL comlink.”

“All the more reason to wonder why they haven’t contacted us. They could have begun transmitting as soon as they transited.”

“I agree. Combat assessment?”

Indy paused, no doubt for rhetorical effect rather than to ponder, as the AI could think thousands of times faster than a human. “In space? I’d give them a fight, but I can’t win against these odds. Independence has no spinal weaponry. Eventually I’d have to run or die.”

Straker did pause to think, wishing uselessly that Indy’s consciousness still occupied the old, gutted battleship *Indomitable*.

Carla looked up into Straker’s face. “You think it’s our worst-case scenario?” she asked.

Straker pressed his lips together. “I think we have to assume so. They’re not talking—that’s a bad sign.”

“Then we have to implement the noncombatant evacuation order. Get the civilians out.”

“Agreed. Indy, implement the NEO and the combat-ready plan.”

“All annexes?” Indy asked.

Straker had no choice but to activate all the annexes—the sub-plans to the standard combat operations order. Worst case meant worst case. He could always cancel if he was wrong. “All annexes. We’ll be back to base in half an hour. Straker out.”

The aircar trip took only twenty-three minutes as Carla overrode the safeties and sent the vehicle screaming at near-Mach over the landscape. She brought it in hot onto the Breakers’ central aerospace pad and dropped Straker off.

“I’ll see to the kids and start cracking the whip on the civilians,” she yelled before roaring away.

Breakers and their ground vehicles scurried in all directions, exuding a sense of purposeful chaos. Pilots prepped rows of lifters and Marksman

dropships, while in the distance dust showed where armored vehicles were forming into lines, heading for their loading points.

General Johnny “Loco” Paloco was there to meet him. “The shit is hitting the fan,” he said with a smile.

Straker began walking toward the headquarters building. “Then why do you look happy?”

“Relieved, more like it. I knew this long break we’ve been on couldn’t last. Nothing does.”

“You’re the most optimistic pessimist I know, Loco.”

“I think that title goes to Gurung, actually.”

“No argument there.” Straker had never seen the Gurkha without a broad smile, which became bigger the hotter things got. “But my point stands.”

Loco shrugged. “I am what I am. Sucks for the civilians, but you and me weren’t made to sit in garrison and do nothing but train.”

Straker turned to look Loco in the face. “You realize we have to either fight our own people or run, right?”

“Are they our people?”

“Humans, anyway.”

“I don’t care who I fight, Derek. Figuring that stuff out is your job. As long as my kid is safe, me and my suit are at your service.”

“Mine? Not the Republic’s?”

Loco snorted. “The Breakers are loyal to you, Derek. To the Liberator, not to some government a hundred light-years away. Besides, the Victory Party doesn’t represent us.”

Straker sighed. “We’re devolving into feudalism and tribalism. Loyalty to a lord, or a party, not to a constitution or nation. I’d hoped to move beyond that.”

“You know, for a guy who reads history you sure do ignore its lessons.”

Straker bristled. “What do you mean?”

“People don’t fight for their governments. They fight for their buddies, for their families, maybe for the leaders they know personally.”

“Sometimes they fight for their ideals, or a cause. For the people, or the common good. To destroy evil.”

Loco held his hands out, palms down, one high, one low. He wiggled the bottom hand. “That stuff’s down here.” He waggled the top hand. “My stuff’s up here. Mine always beats yours.”

“That’s...pathetic.”

“That’s reality,” Loco replied. “You always wanted to serve something greater, something big, huge, Derek—the Hundred Worlds, the Republic, the people, the Constitution—the fucking galaxy, for Cosmos’ sake. But these guys—your guys—” he gestured around them, “—they look to you to figure that stuff out for them. Their ‘something greater’ is the Breakers. The Breakers are their family, and the Breakers are Straker’s Breakers. You’re the commander. They trust you. They trust me. They trust each other. They don’t trust them.” Loco stabbed his index finger up at the sky. “Do you?”

“No. I don’t.” Straker’s heart was bleak as he surveyed the men and women rushing to do his will. “And yeah. I know all that, deep down. I just hoped we could’ve avoided this, could’ve been more.”

“We are what we are, Derek. You’re the Liberator, but we’re the Breakers. Now you gotta decide what the Breakers are gonna do.”

“Fight or run.”

“Yeah.”

“What do you think?”

Loco chewed a lip. “I say fight. And you?”

Straker sighed. “I’m not the reckless young man I used to be. Five years and two children...they’ve changed me. For the better, I hope. I like to think I’m wiser now.”

“Which means...”

“I’m tending toward running—still with Annex Zulu options, of course. Leaving the Republic entirely.”

Loco shrugged. “It’s not my decision, though. Not really yours, either. It’s theirs.”

Straker’s eyebrows rose. “You just got done saying how they’re all so loyal to me, and I’m the commander, but suddenly they decide on their own? Which is it?”

Loco grabbed Straker’s lapel in his fist and shook it, stopping him in his tracks. “If we were fighting anyone but our own government, I’d say it’s your decision. But, if you do anything except comply with the civilian government, no matter how corrupt they’ve gotten, you’ve mutinied. Everyone has the right to decide that for themselves, whether to follow you into mutiny or not. You can make a lot of decisions for them, but not that one. You have to give them that choice for their own.” Loco released Straker’s tunic and patted it flat. “Just this once.”

“Yeah. You’re right.” Straker sighed, and then stuck in his comlink.
“Indy, you still listening?”

“Of course, General.” Naturally, the AI could easily pay attention to many things at once. She probably had a permanent subroutine keeping tabs on Straker. A little creepy, but in this case, it made Indy the perfect aide-de-camp and divisional chief of staff.

Straker eyed the big chrono on the wall critically. Twenty-six hours, best case. That wasn’t much time to prepare.

“It’s 1120 hours now,” he said. “Pass the word for the key personnel to assemble in the Big Room at 1200.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

“Straker out.” He slapped Loco’s shoulder. “Let’s go get a hot meal. They’ll be shutting down the mess hall after lunch, and I get a feeling it’ll be a long day.”

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